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"Circulating Emotions: Gendered Representation in Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp"

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Abstract:

This paper, titled "Circulating Emotions: Gendered Representation in Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp," examines the role of affect in constructing gendered identities in Heart Lamp through Sara Ahmed's Feminist Affect Theory. It explores how emotions such as fear, shame, pain, and care circulate within domestic and social spaces, shaping women's lived experiences under intersecting structures of patriarchy, caste, religion, and class. Drawing on Ahmed's concept of "affective economies," the study argues that emotions are not private states but social forces that organize relations of power and belonging. In the selected stories, affective regimes regulate women's bodies and choices, often producing silence, endurance, and emotional labour as normative conditions of existence. However, the narratives also reveal moments where affect becomes disruptive, enabling subtle forms of resistance and redefinition of selfhood. The paper contends that Heart Lamp foregrounds gender not only as a social identity but also as an emotional and embodied experience shaped by circulating affects.

Keywords: Affective economies, Gender representation, Sara Ahmed, Emotion, Feminist theory.

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INTRODUCTION:

Contemporary Indian women's writing has brought to the fore the emotional realities of women on the margins of society, whose lives are shaped by caste, religion, class and patriarchy. Rather than simply narrating

oppression, these literary works investigate how emotions function as mechanisms through which power circulates and social hierarchies are maintained. In this respect, Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp is an important

part of the present-day feminist literary output. The collection shows, through stories of everyday experiences, women negotiating fear, shame, silence, endurance and emotional labour within deeply patriarchal social structures. The emotional lives of these women are not presented as mere individual psychological experiences, but as the products of larger cultural and social systems.

This paper examines *Heart Lamp* through the lens of Sara Ahmed's Feminist Affect Theory, in particular her concept of 'affective economies'. "Emotions are not simply individual property but circulate socially and are attached to bodies, identities and communities" (Ahmed). It uses emotions like fear, pain, disgust, love, and shame to keep social boundaries in place and reproduce relations of power. Patriarchal societies often socialize women through affective mechanisms that control behaviour and encourage conformity. So, affect is political in that it shapes possibilities of belonging, agency and resistance. As mechanisms of social control, emotions work in *Heart Lamp*, but they also show the possibility of resistance. Women's experiences of humiliation, abandonment, care and suffering show how patriarchal

structures operate through emotional conditioning, rather than simply direct violence. At the same time, these structures are destabilized through anger, refusal, emotional withdrawal, and survival. The stories thus become important sites for understanding how gendered identities are emotionally constructed and negotiated.

This study is an analysis of selected stories from *Heart Lamp* about the movement of affect in domestic and communal spaces. It argues that the collection theorizes gender as not merely a social category but as an embodied emotional experience produced by power relations. Mushtaq foregrounds the affective dimensions of women's lives to expose the intimate workings of patriarchy, and to highlight the subtle forms of resistance that emerge within oppressive conditions.

Sara Ahmed and Feminist Affect Theory

Sara Ahmed's work in feminist and cultural studies has reshaped the field of emotion and affect in significant ways. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed questions the assumption that emotions are private states of the psyche that take place within individuals. Rather, she contends that emotions are social and relational. Emotions

circulate between bodies and shape collective identities, social norms and structures of power. "Affective economies" is how Ahmed describes the circulation of emotions through social spaces and their attachment to particular bodies and identities. "Emotions, Ahmed says, 'stick' to some bodies over and over again through social and cultural associations. Marginalised communities can be associated with fear; women's sexuality with shame; patriarchal control with honour. These emotional ties set social boundaries, defining who belongs and who does not. Emotions are political in that they shape social relations and reproduce hierarchies. Ahmed's theory is useful for the analysis of literary texts that work with women's experiences as it moves the analysis away from explicit structures of oppression and towards the subtle emotional mechanisms through which power operates. Women are disciplined by patriarchal societies through laws and institutions and also through affective training. Women are taught to be ashamed of defiance, to fear social exclusion, to prioritize care work, and to internalize silence. Emotional labour is central to femininity. For Ahmed, however, the affect can also generate possibilities for resistance.

Emotions such as anger, discomfort, and grief can challenge dominant social expectations and reveal inequalities. In this way, feminist politics is a critical analysis of how emotions organize everyday life and how they can be mobilized for change. Using Ahmed's theory applied to *Heart Lamp*, we have a way of understanding how emotions circulate in families and communities and how they shape women's identities and regulate their actions. These stories illustrate the ways in which affective economies uphold patriarchal authority and simultaneously create spaces for emotional resistance.

Gendered Experience and Emotional Regulation in *Heart Lamp*

One of the most striking features of *Heart Lamp* is the representation of women's emotional lives in the context of everyday domestic spaces. The stories do not rely on dramatic events alone, but highlight the quotidian emotional realities that normalize gendered oppression. Fear, silence, shame, and emotional endurance are repeated conditions of women's existence. Women are expected to preserve family honour through obedience and emotional reserve, in many stories. Their desires, frustrations and anger are suppressed to

maintain social stability. Ahmed's theory explains the political workings of these emotional expectations. Emotions are circulated in the service of patriarchal structures to elicit compliance. Women learn that resistance can result in shame, exclusion or violence and so emotional discipline is internalized. Fear is an affective force that recurs in the collection. Women fear abandonment, social judgment, domestic violence and moral policing. This fear influences behaviour even without the direct punishment. Women's actions are regulated enough by the anticipation of emotional and social consequences. Ahmed argues that fear operates by creating boundaries and constraining mobility. Likewise, the women in the Heart Lamp are often emotionally confined to domestic spaces. Another important emotion in the text is shame. Honour, respectability, and sacrifice are central to female identity. Women are taught to be ashamed of their bodies, their sexuality, their desires. Patriarchal systems associate shame with female autonomy, thereby reinforcing control. Women in Mushtaq's stories often internalize these expectations and blame themselves for suffering and emotional failure. Narratives are also central to care and

emotional labour. Women are expected to nurture families, absorb emotional pain, and put others before themselves. Ahmed's feminist framework helps us understand how care can turn into a gendered obligation rather than a freely chosen emotional practice. Emotional labour is what maintains patriarchal structures as women are always managing relationships and social harmony despite their exploitation. Yet Heart Lamp does not represent women as passive victims. There are moments of emotional resistance all along the collection. Sometimes silence is a kind of refusal, not submission. Anger disturbs the household authority. Withdrawal emotionally is a symptom of dissatisfaction with patriarchal expectations. These are moments that show affect is unstable and can create disruption

Fear as an Affective Structure

One of the strongest emotional forces coursing through Heart Lamp is fear. And fear is a force that works to organize proximity and distance. Fear moves bodies away from danger and solidifies social boundaries, Ahmed says. Fear is a disciplinary technology in patriarchal societies that restricts women's mobility, speech and autonomy. In Mushtaq's stories women are constantly

negotiating fear in the private and the public space. Fear of social judgement governs the behaviour of women within communities, and fear of male authority structures family relationships. Female characters are often expected to be criticized and punished before they do anything. This expectation is an example of how patriarchal control is exercised internally through affective conditioning.

In *Heart Lamp*, the private sphere often becomes a site of emotional anxiety instead of security. Marriage, motherhood and family duty are associated with emotional pressure and surveillance. Women must look to themselves, lest they bring shame or rancour. Thus fear is made normal as a part of daily life.

Ahmed's theory sheds light on how fear is circulated collectively rather than individually. Women learn fear as a cultural story, as a family structure, as a social expectation. Mothers transmit caution to daughters, communities enforce behavioural codes, and religious or cultural norms reinforce emotional regulation. Fear is therefore embedded in gendered socialization.

Fear in *Heart Lamp* is not presented as complete helplessness at the same time.

Some women start to see the structures that create their fear and to question them. This knowledge challenges patriarchal authority, showing fear as socially constructed, not inherent. Mushtaq's telling of women's emotional life makes fear a palpable political condition.

Shame, Silence, and the Politics of Respectability

Shame is a central affect in the affective world of *Heart Lamp*. Ahmed argues that shame is a painful consciousness of the self in relation to others. It is derived from social exposure and enforces conformity on individuals by reinforcing norms. In patriarchal societies shame is closely linked to female respectability. Mushtaq's women are again and again saddled with the responsibility of preserving family honour. Their behaviour, speech, sexuality and emotional expression is under constant surveillance. Any deviation from the social norm threatens not only the individual's reputation but also the collective respectability. Women internalize shame and self-police. Shame is a mechanism of control, but so is silence. Women who suffer, are abused, or are dissatisfied often remain silent; to speak is to risk social condemnation. Ahmed's

framework shows that silence is not simply the absence of speech, but an affective state produced through fear and shame. Silence maintains the order of patriarchy by preventing emotional disturbance.

But in *Heart Lamp*, silence is multilayered and complex. Sometimes silence is a resignation. Sometimes silence is a strategic withdrawal from structures of oppression. Women may refuse to communicate in order to show anger or to save face. This ambiguity reveals the instability of the affective economies.

Mushtaq's stories illustrate the emotional cost of respectability politics for women. Women's virtue is romanticized in sacrifice, endurance, and modesty. Women who defy these expectations face ostracism and humiliation. The collection offers detailed portraits of emotional pain and critiques cultural systems that equate silence and self-denial with femininity.

Emotional Labour and Gendered Care

An important aspect of *Heart Lamp* is its exploration of emotional labour in domestic and family relationships. Emotional labour is the regulation of feelings to produce a publicly observable facial and bodily display; this can be accomplished through

the modulation or fabrication of feelings to meet social and cultural standards. In patriarchal societies, women are often responsible for the emotional caregiving. The women in Mushtaq's stories are always doing care work. They mediate disputes, absorb emotional injuries, mother family members and keep the household running smoothly. They're supposed to contribute emotionally, but seldom recognized. Ahmed's feminist affect theory exposes the association of emotional labour with femininity as social obligation. Care in the stories is thus deeply political. Women are lauded for sacrifice and endurance, their own personal desires still held in check. Women's time, energy and identity are eaten up by emotional labour. Even when women are suffering they continue to provide care because altruism is socially valued. At the same time, emotional labour produces emotional exhaustion and alienation. We are stuck in cycles of caregiving and minimal room for self-expression." Family and community needs are still placed before their emotional needs. Mushtaq captures this tiredness with a muted realism that accentuates the invisibility of the women's labour.

Ahmed's theory helps to show how emotions

move unevenly across power structures. Women are more prone to internalize group pain while men tend to be emotionally distant or controlling. The unequal distribution of emotional responsibility sustains patriarchal hierarchies. But the stories also show that care can be transformative when women direct their emotional energy to solidarity and survival. Shared suffering creates emotional bonds between women, moments of empathy and mutual recognition. These moments challenge the isolating effects of patriarchal structures

Resistance and Affective Disruption

Although *Heart Lamp* depicts intense emotional suffering, the collection is not entirely pessimistic. Within the stories, there are moments of affective disruption which reveal possibilities of resistance and selfassertion. Ahmed says that emotions such as anger, discomfort and grief can interrupt dominant social norms and expose injustice.

Women in Mushtaq's narratives sometimes stand against the patriarchal expectations by way of emotional refusal. Anger is disruptive because it defies the ideals of feminine obedience and patience. Female anger threatens authority in the home by exposing

concealed inequalities. Emotional withdrawal can also be a form of resistance. Some characters withdraw emotionally from oppressive relationships, and refuse to provide expected forms of care or obedience. This withdrawal destabilises the emotional economy that sustains patriarchal structures. The stories also stress that survival itself is a form of resistance. Women continue to negotiate oppressive conditions, preserving fragments of identity and dignity. Their endurance is not represented as passive acceptance, but as a complex emotional strategy shaped by limited possibilities. Ahmed argues that affective resistance does not always manifest as dramatic rebellion. Small emotional shifts can challenge dominant norms when they undermine expected emotional performances. In *Heart Lamp*, subtle acts of refusal show the instability of patriarchal authority. Through the portrayal of women's emotional complexities, Mushtaq challenges stereotypical representations of marginalized women as either silent victims or heroic rebels. Instead, the stories stand for resistance as fragmented, emotional and rooted in everyday life.

Narrative Style and Emotional Realism

The affective power of *Heart Lamp* is greatly attributed to Mushtaq's narrative style. The stories are based on emotional realism, not melodrama, so readers can relate closely to the interior lives of the women characters. Daily talk, silences, gestures, and domestic routines are infused with emotion-laden narrative elements.

This emotional realism is consistent with Ahmed's idea of affect as emerging from everyday social encounters. The emotions in the stories are not isolated dramatic events but continuous forces shaping the daily existence. Little things add up, emotionally speaking and one can see the weight of patriarchal pressure still lingers. The language of the stories is often one of emotional reserve. Rather than directly depicting suffering, Mushtaq allows emotional tension to build slowly through dialogue and observation. This nuanced narrative technique reflects the emotional suppression of women in patriarchal cultures.

The domestic spaces depicted in the collection also have a symbolic function. Homes become sites of increased flows of emotions that configure relationships and identities. Power works through everyday interactions in emotionally coded spaces

such as kitchens, courtyards, bedrooms and communal spaces.

Mushtaq's focus on common women adds to the political aspect of the collection. The stories center on marginalized voices, on emotional experiences, and in so doing, they challenge dominant literary narratives that disregard the affective realities of subaltern women.

Conclusion

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* is a powerful examination of gendered emotional experience within patriarchal social structures. Through the lens of Sara Ahmed's Feminist Affect Theory, the collection can be read as a representation of affective economies that shape women's identities, relationships, and opportunities for agency. The stories expose the social circulation of emotions such as fear, shame, silence and care, and how they affix to the bodies of women and shape everyday life. Patriarchal authority is exercised not only through explicit structures of domination but also through the socialization of emotions that normalizes obedience, sacrifice, and endurance. Women internalise affective expectations that regulate behaviour and cement gender hierarchies. At the same time, *Heart Lamp* makes

transparent the fragility of these affective structures. Moments of anger, refusal, withdrawal and survival disrupt dominant norms and open up possibilities of resistance. Mushtaq presents women as emotionally complex subjects negotiating oppressive conditions, not passive recipients of suffering.

Sara Ahmed's framework is especially useful in the understanding of the political nature of emotion in literary representation. This article explores the circulation of affect in the domestic and social domain to draw attention to the intimate ways in which power operates in everyday life. Ultimately *Heart Lamp* demonstrates that gender is not just a social identity but an embodied emotional condition, produced by intersecting structures of patriarchy, caste, religion and class. The collection's sophisticated representation of women's emotional realities makes a significant contribution to contemporary feminist literary discourse and provides valuable insights into the politics of affect in South Asian women's writing.

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