

Slow Entropy and the Thermodynamics of Gendered Exhaustion in Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* and *Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal*

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the celebrated *Heart Lamp* and *Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal* by South Asian author Banu Mushtaq through the lens of entropy and thermodynamics; not necessarily in the literal sense of determining social order, but as a way to illustrate the metaphorical aspect of depletion, lack of recuperative ability, and energy expenditure in the context of gender relations inside domestic systems. In the universe of Mushtaq, domesticity does not constitute either a thermodynamic system or a closed system, but rather an enclosed social sphere, where domestic work, silencing, emotional stress, and lack of autonomy result in constant depletion. Using Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labour, and Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, this study critically analyses the concept of gendered endurance within the context of entropy. By reframing domestic endurance as an entropic process rather than a moral virtue, this paper offers entropy as a critical vocabulary for understanding the quiet, cumulative nature of gendered oppression in contemporary South Asian fiction.

Keywords: Entropy; Cultural Metaphor; Gendered Exhaustion; South Asian Literature; Banu Mushtaq.

Introduction

One significant strand of recent scholarship on South Asian women's writing has been a shift away from spectacular violence to everyday regulation of gender. Blessy Samjose, in the article "‘I Want to Do Something with My Life’: Reading Resistance in South Asian Girlhoods Portrayed in *Keeping Corner*, *Climbing the Stairs*, and *Neela: Victory Song*" (2023), rightly notes: "As gendered subalterns, the girls choose everyday resistance to undermine oppressive norms, such as child marriage and child widowhood... although such acts of resistance may appear minor or inconsequential when enacted within the inner domesticity of household spaces, they still spark new possibilities for girlhoods" (Samjose 637).

In this regard, Banu Mushtaq, a renowned Indian Kannada language author, lawyer, and activist from the state of Karnataka, is well known worldwide for her anthology of short stories titled *Heart Lamp* (2025), which made history on 20 May 2025, becoming the first Kannada language book and the first short story collection to win the International Booker Prize

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(Booker Prize Foundation). The short stories of Mushtaq are an important contribution to this trend, especially in relation to the depiction of the everyday life of the domestic sphere, where suffering does not appear to be spectacular or exceptional but ordinary. Specifically, the short stories titled *Heart Lamp* and *Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal*, included in her book, belong to this literary trend through their consideration of the domestic sphere as a place of endurance, emotional fatigue, and survival, rather than rebellion. Instead of assuming automatically that endurance turns into resistance, this paper questions what emerges if survival is read as proof of gradual depletion.

Before using entropy as an analogy within literature and culture, one must understand the scientific principle within thermodynamics. Entropy has been described as “the measure of a system’s thermal energy per unit temperature that is unavailable for doing useful work” (Drake). Yet in this paper, entropy is not understood literally as a physical principle within domestic situations, but it is used as an analogical tool to analyse processes of cumulative depletion, deteriorating recuperative abilities, and differential expenditure of energy. The paper introduces the theory of slow entropy as an interpretive approach to these narratives and does not draw equivalences in terms of physical properties between domestic life and thermodynamic principles, but rather uses the latter heuristically in order to analyse the former. In literature, thermodynamics frequently functions metaphorically, particularly through the concept of entropy. According to the Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs (1988), entropy has been used to describe eschatological visions in fiction, a point elaborated by American literary theorist Lois Zamora:

A contemporary variation on the apocalyptic vision is provided by the metaphor of entropy. Like apocalypse, entropy is an eschatological vision; it is based on the second law of thermodynamics, which describes the gradual levelling of energy in the universe and the molecular equilibrium called “heat death” at the end of the process. Entropy posits a world moving toward its extinction inexorably and irreversibly; the end is not to be orchestrated with the great crescendo of apocalyptic cataclysm but rather with the decrescendo of entropic chaos. (Zamora)

The present argument departs from Zamora’s eschatological model: entropy here describes not terminal apocalypse but the attritional depletion through which ordinary domestic order is sustained.

In literary analysis, the metaphorical application of entropy enables the analysis of how stories represent the process of gradual decay, depletion, and exhaustion and therefore has a particular application in the analysis of the cumulative and gendered exhaustion of Mushtaq’s characters in *Heart Lamp* and *Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal*. In this cultural translation, the metaphor directs attention to asymmetrical expenditure: patriarchal domestic order appears stable because the costs of maintaining that stability are internalised by women. The

application of entropy to a cultural-literary context provides a powerful metaphor for thinking about gender exhaustion not as a crisis but as a gradual accumulation. Gendered exhaustion, in this way, refers to the emotional, physical, and ethical labour that women undertake to maintain domestic and social stability. In these stories, the domestic sphere is figured as a socially enclosed system in which the energy of women is constantly being expended metaphorically through emotional regulation, reproductive labour, caregiving, compliance, recuperation, and reciprocity. The stories do not tell a story of crisis or transformation but rather the process of endurance itself as entropic, one that sustains social order while simultaneously unravelling the inner lives of women.

The existing criticism of Banu Mushtaq's writings considered here has largely emphasised the concerns of the lived experience of Muslim women, patriarchy, marginalisation, and resistance in the Kannada Bandaya Sahitya (protest literature) tradition, focusing on Mushtaq's engagement with law and activism and her preoccupation with the everyday patriarchal experiences (Virgandham, 2025). Mary adopts an intersectional/Marxist-feminist approach to this collection of stories, focusing on how poverty, early marriage, the lack of property rights, and reproductive freedom shape the lives of women in strictly patriarchal social orders (Mary). In a similar vein, the feminist analysis would see silence itself as a form of strategic and ethical resistance, one that seeks to reframe the apparent passivity of women as a performative act of agency, one that maintains dignity and resilience in the face of oppressive domestic and religious environments (Dutta). While these approaches to the stories are certainly useful in challenging simplistic notions of voicelessness, what remains less developed in these readings is an account of exhaustion as an accumulative structure rather than a temporary consequence of oppression. Furthermore, thermodynamic metaphors such as entropy have been largely unaddressed in the reception of Mushtaq's fiction, even as they might enable a reading of the slow violence of the everyday.

This paper attempts to fill this gap by interpreting *Heart Lamp* and *Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal* in the context of slow entropy and gendered exhaustion, while also emphasising how everyday endurance, silence, and emotional labour shape women's lives beyond the act of visible resistance. The paper argues that Mushtaq's domestic worlds sustain apparent social stability by transferring the costs of that stability onto women's bodies and affective capacities; 'slow entropy' names this cumulative conversion of endurance into depletion and aims to add a new interpretive vocabulary to South Asian feminist literary criticism through the foregrounding of exhaustion, stillness, and endurance as the key narrative forces.

Theoretical Framework

This paper conceptualises gendered exhaustion in the critical reading of the selected stories through an interdisciplinary framework that draws on literary thermodynamics and entropy, Rob Nixon's notion of 'slow violence', Arlie Hochschild's theory of 'emotional labour', and Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism'. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence is especially useful in articulating how harm in these operates temporally and invisibly. Nixon defines slow violence in this seminal work, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). Although Nixon develops slow violence primarily in environmental contexts, this article adapts its temporal logic of attrition, delayed visibility, and cumulative harm rather than treating domestic violence as equivalent to environmental violence. Mushtaq's stories exemplify this mode of violence in their focus on everyday domestic spaces where suffering is normalised and unremarked.

Arlie Hochschild's theory of 'emotional labour', formulated in *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983) she defines emotional labour as work that requires one "to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others...this kind of labour calls for a coordination of mind and feeling...the worker can become estranged or alienated from an aspect of self...used to do the work" (Hochschild 7). Although Hochschild's theory pertains to the emotional labour that is commodified, the current interpretation attempts to draw a link between this concept and the unpaid process of regulating feelings within a patriarchal family environment. According to Hochschild, emotional labour is the management of emotion to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display. It implies that women are required to regulate their emotions in such a way that they would ensure social harmony. In *Heart Lamp* and *Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal*, the female characters have to suppress their anger, frustration, grief, and fear despite their affective composure. This act of regulating emotions is a hidden process that drains their energies and is viewed as part of the entropic process of depletion of bodily and affective resources.

Moreover, the concept of 'Cruel Optimism' described in Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) can be explained as an attachment that creates "the object... that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving" (Berlant 2). The attachment that is at the heart of cruel optimism is "the good life," in which people are attached to the idea and fantasy of a stable and reciprocal relationship "even when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear

cost abounds” (2). In Mushtaq’s short stories, the women characters are attached to commitments which only bring them exhaustion and stagnation. This theoretical approach allows the analysis of the stories mentioned in this paper as a literature of survival rather than a literature of resistance. The gendered exhaustion described in this paper seems to be a process: an ethical, emotional and physical exhaustion in which energy is constantly spent on maintaining the social order, metaphorically similar to the tendency of nature to reach equilibrium, which is inherent to entropy.

Entropic Domesticity in *Heart Lamp*

The most illustrative case of slow entropy in the work by Mushtaq is given in the title story *Heart Lamp*, in which the gradual exhaustion of the emotional and physical energy resources of a woman as a wife and a mother is discussed. The marriage of Mehrun is a very clear case of what Berlant calls cruel optimism in this context. Although Mehrun has been repeatedly betrayed, humiliated, and even sexually disgusted, she is always encouraged to use “a little bit of smartness and manage all this” (Mushtaq 110) and “to have patience...try to bring him back on the right path with love” (105). Thus, her marital relationship is a fantasy of the ‘good life,’ where she has to endure and not be happy. It is this marital relationship which has been made socially sacred despite its destructiveness from an existential perspective; she remains trapped in this system, which sucks her dry, at the same time not letting her go away. What entropic interpretation brings into Berlant’s work is terminology that describes the price paid for sustaining such an attachment: marital continuity is purchased through the progressive depletion of Mehrun’s affective reserves.

However, Mehrun’s suffering comes more from repetitive requirements of patience, care, adaptation, and moral strength rather than any singular dramatic event. In fact, her emotional collapse is not caused by a single violent act; instead, it is caused by her association with a marriage that no longer sustains life, proving that cruel optimism is not only about hope but about survival, especially for women. As mentioned earlier, the form of violence that exists in this story is not dramatic; rather, it relies on “slow violence”, according to Nixon, which includes demands for silence, honour, and adaptation, as in “The lamp in Mehrun’s heart had been extinguished a long time ago” (110). The family is presented as a regulatory system that takes in her suffering but never acts on it, showing her increasing loneliness as “she had cried, begged to be allowed to sit with them, but everyone had been deaf to her pleas” (111). Such violence is a result of delay, deferral, and moral instruction, making Mehrun’s suffering invisible, even to the people closest to her. The psychological disintegration of Mehrun is the result of this suffering.

Honour in the story functions as a disciplinary form that monitors women's conduct through the threat of morality rather than actual coercion. Mehrun is constantly reminded that her suffering needs to be hidden to secure the marriage prospects of her sisters and the honour of the family, as she is constantly reminded, "It seems like you have made up your mind to bring us dishonour" (103) and "If you had any concern for this family's honour then you would have done that instead of coming here" (106). Honour functions as a tool through which patriarchal control is inscribed on the lives of women such that they are compelled to sacrifice their own lives to secure the honour of the family. Significantly, the statement "The house that your dholi goes to should be the house from which your dhola comes out. This is the life of a decent woman" (106) is a significant redefinition of Mehrun's defiance as a breach of morality, such that Mehrun's fight to attain respect is redefined as a breach of the patriarchal code of honour. Hence, honour works as a system controlling energy, since it prevents the possibility of withdrawal from the domestic set-up and transforms self-sacrifice into virtue.

Reading through the framework of Hochschild's model of emotional labour, one can grasp that motherhood is simultaneously a source of depletion and a relation that interrupts her movement towards self-destruction. The body of Mehrun is marked by the signs of reproductive labour, including sagging breasts and a stomach hanging loose, but this labour is not valued, as she acknowledged in her own words: "I have the burden of five children on me. Their father is roaming around, and I don't have a life" (104). But it is also her motherly love, her daughter Salma's presence, that saves her from her final descent into self-destruction when she says, "Just because you have lost one person, you will throw all of us at that woman's mercy? You are ready to die for Abba, but is it not possible for you to live for our sakes? How can you make us all orphans, Ammi? We want you" (114). This is the moment when motherhood becomes both an exhausting labour and salvation for her. Salma's interference reveals the limitations of the closed-system metaphor as well, where relational ties can sometimes provide restorative abilities even amid a draining domestic system. It is through this performance of marriage as cruel optimism, family as slow violence, honour as discipline, and motherhood as both labour of exhaustion and saving grace that Mushtaq demonstrates how women are ensnared in patriarchal domesticity. The 'extinguished lamp' of Mehrun's heart is neither a failure but a product of emotional labour, delayed justice, and gender survival.

Entropic Domesticity in *Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal*

Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal continues Mushtaq's work of critiquing gendered living spaces from the confines of marriage to the struggles of reproductive living, where love within the home becomes a site of slow violence rather than protection. Zeenat's initial obsession with Shaista's garden portrays the household as a site of order and care. However, the asymmetry that lies behind this apparently ordered situation does not lie only in the gender battles inside the home, but rather in the fact that the source of energy of the household's stability is the body of Shaista. The stability of the household is maintained by means of her fatigue. And hence, the household is a site of entropy, a place where care, physical effort, and capacity for recuperation are always consumed without replenishment. The recurrent pregnancies of Shaista, her shortened recuperation period between the births, and constant postponing of the sterilisation all contribute to the phenomenon of slow entropy of the female body. This slow depletion of the body does not arise from any kind of violence, but from the widespread cultural pressure on feminine stamina. Shaista's statement: "I have never been in confinement for more than fifteen days" (20). This statement can be read as a learned acceptance of the body's exhaustion, where even repose is a temporary privilege. From the perspective of Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence, this is a violence of time rather than a spectacular violence. The seeming stability of the family is maintained by Shaista's unspoken burden.

On the other hand, the narrative also reveals cruel optimism in its most personal form. Iftikhar's hyperbolic claims of love, such as his promise of a Shaista Mahal, his repeated assertion that every cell in his body is alive thanks to her, place Shaista in an affective economy in which love serves as a proxy for care. This love does not disrupt the system that drains her; it aestheticises it. Shaista still believes love will compensate for her exhaustion, even as she becomes more ill and as Asifa's life is quietly constructed along lines that mirror what Berlant calls "the condition in which the promise is everywhere, and the dissolution of the form of being that existed before the event is not cause for mourning or rejoicing: it is just a fact" (28). The fantasy of the 'good life' including a caring husband, healthy children and a beautiful home, sustains her attachment to a system that finally treats her as replaceable. This replaceability is viciously demonstrated with the death of Shaista. The remarriage of her husband is portrayed as a practical necessity rather than an emotional betrayal: "I need someone to take care of the children" (23). The new wife is similarly positioned as a caretaker with little disruption to the existing order. The narrative unsettlingly suggests that the household responds more urgently to the vacancy in care labour than to the irreducible loss of Shaista herself. The lack of stone slabs for her grave is similarly indicative of the erasure of memory that is demonstrated in the way that loss is quietly incorporated into the domestic routine. Memory is similarly subject to the forces of entropy. What is left is Asifa, similarly

positioned as a surrogate mother to the children, inheriting the same economy of care that consumed her own mother's life.

Furthermore, pregnancy, care, and motherhood in the story are not seen as a sense of fulfilment but are recast as an entropic metaphor for bodily expenditure whose costs are not adequately restored through care, rest, or reciprocity. Gender exhaustion cannot be seen as a temporary condition of tiredness or individual vulnerability but is seen as a structural condition resulting from patriarchal structures that are based on the ability of women to absorb exhaustion to sustain the illusion of order in the home. Exhaustion is also seen to be intergenerational. The whispered afterlife reflection of Shaista: "She is not my daughter, she is my mother" (24), points to the exhaustion of care that reorganises family relationships to the point where children are forced into premature emotional maturity. Care is seen to flow upwards and backwards to complete what can be seen as an entropic home circuit: intergenerational transfer of care-debt whereby women sustain life by draining themselves. In the story, love does not disintegrate as a sense of rebellion or rupture, but rather, the emotional and domestic labour required to sustain it is gradually depleted, leaving women to bear the cumulative costs of maintaining a relationship even after the intensity of love has diminished.

In this story, silence does not play a role as a visual cue for resistance; it can be read metaphorically as a strategy of affective conservation, where expression itself carries social and emotional costs, withholding speech registers diminished capacity rather than empowered resistance. Shaista does not openly express her resistance; instead, her strength is indicated by her usual compliance and silence, in which she endures her suffering without expression. Silence, then, is a means of survival in a system in which emotions are constantly demanded but never replenished. Significantly, Mushtaq resists spectacularising suffering. There is no dramatic moment of disruption or exceptional catastrophe through which Shaista's suffering is made visible as crisis. Rather, her death is prepared through the routine cycle of pregnancy, caregiving, and emotional labour, which leads to an accumulation of tiredness that slowly reduces her chances for survival to the point where her death becomes the tragic fallout of the everyday process of being depleted. It is within this context that her narrative choice to avoid the dramatic also mirrors the entropic forces at play within the household, in which destruction occurs in a subtle manner, away from public knowledge and thus control. Here, exhaustion within the narrative occurs not as a product of some violent act but as a result of the normalisation of exhaustion.

Conclusion

Overall, through these stories by Banu Mushtaq, the invitation for the feminist critique should be to consider not just the theme of disruption and resistance but also attrition, resilience, and reduced capacity. Mushtaq reveals how marriage, motherhood, and honour within the family are all regimes of slow violence in which damage is inflicted through cumulative and invisible means rather than through forceful actions. Interpreted through the concept of cruel optimism, these stories reveal how women are committed to the ideals of a ‘good life’, including a harmonious marriage, rewarding motherhood, and family, but that these very ideals destroy their lives in many ways. The near-sacrifice of Mehrun in the story *Heart Lamp* exemplifies how marriage becomes the space of terminal cruel optimism, where survival becomes equated with morality and resistance becomes equated with moral deviance. The sacrifice of Mehrun’s happiness in the name of honour within the family is an example of how patriarchal kinship becomes a means of slow violence in which women have to submit. By reading these narratives from the perspective of entropy, this paper contends that gendered exhaustion is not only a state of occasional fatigue, but rather a systematic one.

Finally, Mushtaq’s fiction needs to be seen as a call for a re-examination of feminist critique itself. Instead of focusing on the site of rupture and resistance, Mushtaq’s fiction emphasises the need to look at the site of women’s erosion in the name of love, duty, and honour. In the context of entropy as metaphor and method, the paper contends that her fiction offers a deeply feminist critique of the current debates on care, affect, and endurance. Reading Mushtaq alongside thermodynamic vocabularies demonstrates how literary representations of domestic depletion can be illuminated through carefully delimited science-derived metaphors. Mushtaq demonstrates the capacity of contemporary South Asian fiction to merge literary sensibility with scientific insight, probing the invisible structures that govern domestic and social life as David Porush rightly observes: “As science becomes better and better at what it does, literary discourse finds new and more hypertrophic avenues for its expression... in other hands, this complementarity of scientific and literary expression presses literature to adopt the guise of the competition” (Porush 54). Slow entropy therefore names not the disappearance of domestic order but its hidden cost: the gradual depletion of those whose labour allows that order to continue appearing stable.

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