



## An Intersectional Reading of Banu Mushtaq's *Black Cobras*

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### Abstract

This paper examines Banu Mushtaq's short story *Black Cobras* through the theoretical framework of intersectionality. The narrative foregrounds the struggles of Muslim women in rural Karnataka, revealing how gender, religion, class, and community expectations converge to intensify oppression. By situating Mushtaq's story within Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework and postcolonial feminist discourse, the paper argues that *Black Cobras* dramatizes both the violence of layered marginalization and the latent possibilities of collective resistance.

### 1. Introduction

Banu Mushtaq, an acclaimed Kannada writer, has emerged as a vital voice in contemporary Indian literature. Her collection *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories*, translated by Deepa Bhashti, won the 2025 International Booker Prize—the first Kannada work to receive this honor. Mushtaq is not only a writer but also an activist, consistently advocating for women's rights and raising her voice against fundamentalism and social injustices in Karnataka. She has also campaigned for Muslim women's right to enter mosques. Her oeuvre spans six short story collections, a novel, and essays and poetry, with translations available in Urdu, Hindi, Tamil, and English.

Mushtaq's fiction consistently interrogates patriarchal norms and highlights the struggles of women caught in intersecting

structures of oppression, such as gender, class, and religion. This paper analyzes *Black Cobras* through the lens of intersectionality, demonstrating how the story critiques structural violence and dramatizes the compounded vulnerabilities of Muslim women. At the same time, Mushtaq's narrative gestures toward resistance, particularly through the symbolic power of collective female solidarity.

### 2. Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality

Intersectionality is defined as "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups" (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary). Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept to analyze how overlapping

structures of power render certain groups—particularly women of color—uniquely vulnerable (*"Mapping the Margins"* 1244). Intersectionality critiques both feminist and antiracist frameworks that treat gender or race in isolation, insisting instead on analyzing the interlocking systems that produce exclusion.

Crenshaw identifies three dimensions of intersectionality: structural, political, and representational. Structural intersectionality refers to institutional barriers such as immigration laws or poverty that leave women of color vulnerable. Political intersectionality critiques activist movements that neglect women's specific concerns, while representational intersectionality addresses stereotypical images of marginalized women in media and literature. As Crenshaw argues, *"the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism"* (140). In South Asia, where caste, class, religion, and gender are deeply entangled, intersectionality becomes indispensable for literary analysis.

Postcolonial feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty extend this critique by highlighting the dangers of Eurocentric feminism. In *"Under Western Eyes,"* Mohanty argues that Western feminist scholarship often *"discursively colonizes"* women of the Global South, reducing them to a singular image of the *"Third World woman"* (334–35). Such homogenization obscures the heterogeneous realities shaped by colonial histories, caste hierarchies, and class divisions. Reading *Black Cobras* through this intersectional and postcolonial feminist lens foregrounds how Mushtaq resists such silencing by granting narrative agency to otherwise marginalized women.

### 3. Plot Summary of *Black Cobras*

The story follows Aashraf, a poor Muslim woman abandoned by her husband Yakub after she bears three daughters. Struggling to care for her children, Aashraf pleads with the mosque's mutawalli (religious

authority) for financial help when her youngest child falls gravely ill. The mutawalli dismisses her appeal with fatalistic and patriarchal justifications. Tragically, the child dies at the mosque's doorstep, symbolizing both institutional neglect and the violent indifference of religious authority. In the aftermath, neighborhood women surround Aashraf and curse the mutawalli, likening themselves to *"black cobras"* whose venom represents suppressed rage and collective defiance. This deceptively simple narrative dramatizes the tension between systemic oppression and the symbolic acts of resistance available to marginalized women.

### 4. Gender and Religious Authority

Mushtaq portrays how religious institutions reinforce patriarchal oppression. Aashraf's request for aid is not simply denied; it is denied through patriarchal interpretations of faith that sanction neglect. The mutawalli embodies institutionalized authority, using theology to reinforce women's subjugation. Crenshaw's framework clarifies that Aashraf's vulnerability is not reducible to gender alone but emerges from the intersection of gender and religious identity. As a Muslim woman subject to male religious authority, she faces exclusion compounded by both structures. It is evident that the institutions which are meant to help the vulnerable ironically contribute to their marginalization.

### 5. Class and Economic Vulnerability

Aashraf's poverty intensifies her oppression. Her inability to secure medical help for her child highlights how class intersects with gender and religion to heighten precarity. The mutawalli's dismissal reflects the systemic invisibility of poor women within patriarchal community hierarchies. Poverty here is not a backdrop but a determinant of whether women's voices are acknowledged at all.

## 6. Collective Female Agency

The story's climax rests not on institutional change but on communal defiance. The neighborhood women's curses, described as venomous and cobra-like, rupture the silence imposed upon them. While their resistance may not dismantle patriarchal power, it symbolically challenges its inevitability. Mushtaq underscores that even within oppressive systems, women can claim fleeting yet meaningful forms of agency through collective expression.

## 7. The Symbolism of the "Black Cobras"

The cobra metaphor is central to Mushtaq's narrative strategy. In Indian cultural contexts, cobras signify both fear and divine power. By likening women to cobras, Mushtaq imbues their collective defiance with potency. Silenced in ordinary circumstances, these women become threatening agents capable of unsettling authority. In *Black Cobras*, the women's metaphorical venom destabilizes patriarchal authority, allowing the subaltern voice to resonate through symbolic disruption.

## 8. Discussion: Intersectionality as Resistance

*Black Cobras* illustrates that intersectionality is not only a framework for mapping oppression but also for recognizing emergent solidarities. Aashraf's plight reflects the convergence of gender, poverty, and religious subjugation, while the women's collective defiance demonstrates that shared marginalization can foster solidarity. Although their curses do not achieve structural reform, they redefine agency for women historically relegated to silence. Mushtaq's narrative thus insists that resistance exists not only in sweeping transformations but also in symbolic, communal gestures.

## Conclusion

Through *Black Cobras*, Banu Mushtaq dramatizes the intersecting oppressions endured by Muslim women in rural Karnataka. Aashraf's suffering underscores

how gender, class, and religion combine to marginalize, while the cobra-like defiance of neighborhood women reveals that collective solidarity, however symbolic, constitutes resistance. Interpreted through the lens of intersectionality, the story situates Mushtaq's fiction within broader feminist and postcolonial debates on agency, oppression, and the subaltern voice.

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