

## **Women, Space, and Silence: A Comparative Reading of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp***

Anuska Pal\*  

### **Abstract**

*This article examines the representation of women in the writings of Virginia Woolf and Banu Mushtaq, exploring the articulation of feminist resistance within Western modernist and Indian postcolonial contexts. Through a reading of Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" and Mushtaq's "Heart Lamp", this article examines the related ideas of space, voice, and silence as the frameworks of women's agency. While Woolf's feminism emphasizes the need for intellectual freedom, economic independence, and creative space as the conditions for liberation, Mushtaq's feminist writings represent women's struggles within patriarchal society through the ideals of endurance, emotional strength, and silence.*

*This article contends that these two works of literature present two different paradigms of feminist thought: one theoretical and transformative, and the other experiential and survivalist. Through this comparative analysis, this article also contests the universalist ideals of feminism and shows that women's resistance takes culturally specific forms that are determined by the material and social realities of the society.*

**Keywords:** feminism; modernism, postcolonial feminism, women's writing, silence, space, comparative literature

Submitted: 26.01.2026    Revised: 20.03.2026    Accepted: 24.03.2026    Published 30.03.2026

\*Anuska Pal, Guest Faculty in English, Kanyashree University, Krishnanagar, Nadia, West Bengal - 741101, India.

©2026 Anuska Pal. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

## Introduction

In the long run, various cultures or societies, as well as their historical contexts, have given birth to many different types of feminists, literary, theoretical and critical forms of discourse on understanding Women's oppression and resistance in society. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, "Western feminism often risks constructing a 'universal' category of woman that overlooks cultural and material differences" (Mohanty 65).

While Western feminist forms of literary criticism focus on intellectual exclusion from educational and literary history, the writing of women of colour, especially that of postcolonial or minority women writers, will usually address immediate social or domestic issues. As noted, a comparison of Woolf and Mushtaq highlights how the various cultures, or societies from which they come both utilise some of the same feminist principles, although at very different levels of expression.

Virginia Woolf, writing during the early twentieth century in England, examines how women were denied access to education and to a tradition of female authorship. Woolf famously stated in her treatise, *A Room of One's Own* that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 4). In this statement, Woolf highlights how the structural limitations of economic dependence on men and physical limitation (lack of a room of one's own) prevent women from attaining their full potential as intellectuals and writers, the authors of their own, with freedom and power to do so.

Banu Mushtaq's writing depicts women within the socio-cultural contexts in which they live; their lives are shaped and restricted not just by the absence of literary spaces in which they can exist, but also by domestic labour, the hierarchy of marriage, the authority of religion and the vulnerability of economics. Mushtaq's women seldom speak of rebellion as being overt; however, they show their resistance through endurance, through quiet ways of dissenting and through emotional resilience.

### Theoretical framework and research gap:

Scholarship on Virginia Woolf's feminist perspectives has been widely explored through the lenses of both modernist and feminist literary criticism. Elaine Showalter places Virginia Woolf in a historical tradition of women's writing, designating her as a key figure in the "female phase" of literary evolution. In her work *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter observes that Woolf goes beyond the imitation of male literary genres in order to emphasize female experience and consciousness. At the same time, Showalter mentions that Woolf's feminism is ambivalent towards direct feminist militancy, proposing that her preoccupation with androgyny threatens to blur the struggle that is specifically female (Showalter 263-297).

A more theoretical argument in support of Woolf's feminism is provided by Toril Moi in her *Sexual-Textual Politics*. Moi argues that Woolf's work on subjectivity, language, and identity is a precursor to feminist philosophy. Instead of seeing the

“androgynous mind” as a cop-out, Moi sees it as a revolutionary rejection of the gender binarism that Woolf’s work seeks to disrupt. Moi’s reading of Woolf’s feminism is that it is not a destruction of female identity but a subversion of the patriarchal structures that underlie the very notion of identity. Woolf, in this interpretation, is a very political thinker whose nuance is a sign of intellectual power, not weakness (Moi 73).

This article shows that Woolf places both the notions of economic and intellectual independence to shape feminist discussion today. Much of the scholarship regarding the works of Banu Mushtaq has until recently been engaged through the view of either the regional issues of translation or as a minor literature which critically analyses the themes of religion, gender, and domesticity in her works.

This article not only seeks to address this gap by examining the transformation of feminist concerns of space, voice, and subjectivity from the context of British modernism to the context of postcolonial and minor literature in India but also draws attention from both feminist theory as well as post-colonial feminist frameworks of theoretical critique in its attempt to avoid a hierarchical approach to analyse the two bodies of literature instead of employing a contextually specific rationale for a comparative analysis of both bodies of work.

This article argues that Woolf theorizes the structural conditions of women’s freedom while Mushtaq presents us with examples of the consequences of the non-existence of these structural conditions as they apply to women; thus, the pursuit of comparative writings of these two authors prospectively creates complementary feminist paradigms which serve to broaden our understanding of women’s agency in various cultures.

### **Women in Virginia Woolf: Intellectual Space and Creative Agency:**

Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* constructs a historical argument detailing women’s exclusion from literary output throughout time. She uses the hypothetical character of William Shakespeare’s fictional sister, who was truly equal in talent to William Shakespeare, to illustrate the historical pattern of silencing the genius of women by the lack of education and opportunity. “She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was” (Woolf 37). Women have long been denied the ability to grow intellectually by being forced into marriage due to the lack of economic independence (Woolf 36-39).

The metaphor of the “room” represents both material and psychospiritual space which denotes a space of privacy, autonomy, and therefore, freedom from interruption. It is about the space where a person can build a creative thought process that is integrated and not fractured. Virginia also takes it as a chance to use her critique of patriarchal structures like Beadle (Woolf 6), universities and libraries (Woolf 7) and the systems of publishing (Woolf 45) in order to demonstrate that these structures restrict women’s ability to participate in literature, whether as consumers or as producers of literature. Woolf locates resistance to these

patriarchal systems of domination by defining writing as an act of resistance. Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* that throughout history women have been thought of as the subordinate “Other” (Beauvoir 6-8). Woolf’s insistence on women’s authorship seeks to prevent this marginalization by allowing women to exercise narrative authority.

Woolf’s conceptualization of feminism in *A Room of One’s Own* is materially grounded and presupposes access to literacy, economic and intellectual independence, and private space forms of privilege largely available to middle-class women of her time, “Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt, that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (Woolf 58). She argues that women have historically been denied authorship, noting that “Anonymity runs in their blood” (Woolf 39). Woolf explains the material inequality between male and female in educational institutions, remarking upon the lavishness of men’s colleges compared to the poverty of women’s colleges (Woolf 18–21).

Woolf’s arguments, although enough radical, derive from a specific class and sociocultural perspective, a researcher who examines Woolf through the lens of emotion or the context will be able to appreciate and recognize Woolf’s contextual base, since then they will see the direct comparison between the definitions of women by Woolf and how Mushtaq describes them in her works.

#### **Women in Banu Mushtaq: Domestic Confinement and Silent Resistance:**

Mushtaq’s *Heart Lamp* presents a position that women are included only in private domestic spaces. ‘Black Cobras’ (Mushtaq 43) describes how a gender humiliates another in front of an audience by comparing their bodies and asserting that one’s body has more of an assertion of his superiority over another’s body than just the difference in how they urinate, “Lei! If you who squats to pee has this much arrogance, how much arrogance should I, who stands to piss, have?” (Mushtaq 59). That two genders could compare their urination methods to define their respective levels of arrogance diminishes the difference between the two genders to the only difference being how each of them urinates; it thereby legitimizes the existence of power by virtue of being born with specific anatomy.

In Mushtaq’s writing, patriarchal systems of power impose systems of male dominance by finding “natural” ways to create hierarchy among men through daily interactions. Mushtaq employs cobra symbolism to highlight the latent forms of violence and aggression that exist when men interact and assert their masculinity. Similar to how a cobra can kill its prey by striking from a distance, so too will men use psychological warfare in private settings to develop long-term brotherhoods between men and ensure continued domination through humiliation and fear.

Iftikhar expresses eternal devotion to Shaista through the romantic imagery in *Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal* (Mushtaq 8). Howbeit just after her death, he chooses to marry again, “I married her the day after Shaista’s fortieth-day fatiha was over. She is from a poor family. I need someone to look after the children after all, that is why.” (Mushtaq 23), by exposing the considerable disparity between how language

idealizes women, and how men actually behave toward women, revealing the division between language's idealization of women, and men's real actions toward women. Iftikhar expresses his desire to have a "Shaista Mahal," an image he refers to as his journey's goal of experiencing the ultimate experience of love, "If I were an emperor, I would have built a palace to put even the Taj Mahal to shame, and call it Shaista Mahal but his continued creation of a "Shaista Mahal" through the labour of his wife, the physical erasure of everything that made her unique after she died, represent how language can idealize a woman, but reality can tell a different story. The "performative" nature of masculinity described by Mushtaq, demonstrates that while men appear to have a commitment to their wives, this can be misleading, as men are ultimately dependent upon their wives for the labour necessary to produce this perception. Thus, marriage is viewed as a business relationship, ultimately based on a transactional agreement between husband and wife.

In the story titled 'Heart Lamp' (Mushtaq 102) the main theme is emotional endurance rather than overt rebellion. 'Heart Lamp' symbolizes an inner flame that enables a woman to endure neglect or isolation. Mushtaq presents resilience as an inward continuity, contrasting it with Western feminist narratives that emphasize escape and articulation. In lieu of dismantling the patriarchal system, the female protagonist develops psychological autonomy, fostering a form of inward self-sufficiency. The lamp honours her identity in the absence of external validation. "All this is Shaitan's game. Shaitan comes early in the morning, presses your legs, drapes a blanket around you, pats you back to sleep and stops you from offering namaz" (Mushtaq 170). This metaphor shows how even fatigue is moralised. Women internalise guilt for bodily weakness. The "heart lamp" becomes symbolic of sustaining inner faith despite pressure. In this context, the political dimension of feminist resistance lies in calm, continued survival.

Through 'Soft Whispers' (Mushtaq 135) silence is redefined as a mode of communication among women. The play establishes dialogue via glances, half-finished sentences like "Aha, my darling." Aiji hugged me and it rained kisses. "If this snuff smell was not there. . ." (Mushtaq 137), and shared understanding, rather than overt dissent. Mushtaq portrays silence not as submission, but as a vital exchange in a shrivelled domestic space where speech risks punishment, silence offers relief and fosters community. She challenges the notion that feminism valorises only verbal assertion, demonstrating instead that resistance emerges through quiet solidarity, mutual acknowledgment, and a clandestine network of female strength.

To boot, Mushtaq calls into question the dominance of men over women in relation to women's bodies and their decisions by stating that men's domination is through the authority that they claim from God for their religious authority, "No matter which religion one belongs to, it is accepted that the wife is the husband's most obedient servant, his bonded labourer" (Mushtaq, 9). Although there is an inherent tension between religious faith and patrilineal patriarchy, these two elements directly impact the way in which women are oppressed.

### **Comparative Analysis: Space, Voice, and Resistance:**

A comparative reading shows that feminism exists at the juncture of convergence and divergence.

#### **Space:**

Space is simultaneously aspirational, symbolic, and transformative. In *A Room of One's Own*, the 'room' stands for a lot more than physical privacy, represents intellectual autonomy, economic independence, and the ability to think freely and without interruption. Woolf, access (access to education, access to earning a living, and access to institutional recognition) must precede liberation. Space also serves as a necessary precondition of creativity and subjectivity. Woolf further emphasises the historical consequences of women's exclusion from public and intellectual spaces, observing that, according to Margaret Cavendish, "Women live like Bats or Owls, labour like Beasts, and die like Worms. . ." (Woolf 48). Thusly, space is an enabling structure that permits women to define themselves outside the limits of domesticity. The room represents the point of transition between the confines of domesticity and the possibility of self-definition.

Conversely, to Woolf's assertion that the use of space is aspirational in *Heart Lamp*, Banu Mushtaq presents space as constraining upon women who already inhabit it. Spaces such as kitchens, bedrooms, courtyards, and maternity rooms are not symbolic pathways to freedom; they are simply enclosed spaces where women negotiate the implications of their choices. Women do not seek expansion into the world of intellectual institutions but navigate through inherited domestic geographies. Women are confined to the enclosed spaces of domesticity, and these spaces discipline the female experience through routine, surveillance, and obligation. Mushtaq does not represent women as entirely passive within the confines of these spaces but rather shows how women alter their position within them by modifying their gestures, creating an inner self, or creating quiet forms of solidarity with one another. Therefore, while Woolf theorises the necessity of being able to expand into intellectual space, Mushtaq centres her focus on the necessity of maintaining one's sense of self and belonging while being confined by domestic architecture.

#### **Voice and Silence**

Woolf emphasizes articulation as the primary vehicle for women's resistance to patriarchy. Through diverse forms essays, lectures, and narrative experiments she argues that women must create themselves via writing. The 'voice' gained through such expression establishes knowledge and affirms women's societal existence. Reclaiming authorship thus disrupts centuries of literary suppression.

While Woolf prioritizes speaking and writing, Mushtaq challenges this by portraying silence as an adaptive strategy shaped by circumstance. In 'Heart Lamp', women opt for silence not from lack of ideas, but to avoid severe social consequences like punishment, isolation, or ostracism. Silence thus becomes a

survival tactic. Mushtaq draws on the rhetorical concept of 'productive silence' to depict women forming alternative communication through whispered conversations about their lives, shared glances, pauses, or subtle bodily cues. In 'Fire Rain' (Mushtaq 25), Mushtaq presents the idea of religious authority which silences female ethical reasoning and freedom, "You shut up and do your work, he had snapped, and gone to sleep, snoring away" (Mushtaq 29).

Woolf theorizes that articulation liberates women, but Mushtaq illustrates how, in certain socio-cultural contexts, survival demands controlled, quiet behaviour. These contrasting strategies Woolf's vocal assertion versus Mushtaq's strategic silence underscore how the social risks of voicing resistance shape women's choices.

### **Resistance**

Woolf defines resistance as a form of transformation to structures. In her feminist agenda she advocates for women's independence in terms of economic growth, access to education and reforming institutions to break down patriarchal systems, not just to survive living under patriarchal systems but eventually to dismantle the systems themselves. Woolf views resistance as progressive and forward-thinking in that women need to have the economic means to be able to create equally on a creative level. In this regard Woolf's brand of feminism is reformist and therefore institutionally driven. The other way around Mushtaq's feminism is one that is developed from the reality of contexts in which structural transformation seems distant or impossible. The characters in Mushtaq's stories are women who endure oppression from their husbands via restriction due to a husband's authority over them (patriarchal), oppression as a result of religion (religious patriarchy) [e.g. "Anna, this is the share over which I have rights according to Allah and the Prophet's Shariat;" (Mushtaq 26)] and oppression due to economic vulnerability (poor) [e.g. "We did not allow her to study further because there was no one else to look after the house and the children" (Mushtaq 16)]. The women exhibit resistance, not through acts of overt rebellion but rather through acts of preserving their dignity. By the way of illustration, a woman who continues to put energy into her 'heart lamp' (a woman who refuses to take on feelings of shame or who continues to support another woman in the face of receiving no external support) is exhibiting a form of everyday resistance. This type of behaviour is comparable to what many academics refer to as "micro-resistance" and is essentially creating a small way to maintain your identity in systems of oppression. Mushtaq's feminism does not attempt to create alternate institutional forms but rather to document the resilience of women who continue to live within a constraint. Mushtaq's feminist perspective also acknowledges how enormous the structure is upon women yet her work affirms that simply surviving emotionally is a form of resistance.

Woolf and Mushtaq offer a broader view of Feminism than the one-dimensional view of women as free or oppressed. Woolf's literary works illustrate the need to change systemic barriers as well as provide insight into how these barriers affect women on a physical and emotional level. For Woolf's women, their desire is to have

a room of their own; for Mushtaq's women, their challenge is to find their own strength within the confines of a room. In addition, Woolf's feminism is vocal; Mushtaq's is often non-verbal (i.e. body language-expressive dance). Woolf sees potential for change, Mushtaq's sees dignity being upheld despite limitation. By a detailed reading, one may come to understand that the various forms of feminism, including institutional reform and living through oppression, are equal and necessary; that there is no single form of feminism; those distinctions made regarding one form of feminism versus others are incorrect assumptions made by many.

### Conclusion

The work of Woolf and Mushtaq demonstrates the wide range and variety of women's lives, where Woolf's female characters are articulating their needs for intellectual liberty and opportunities to express creativity while Mushtaq depicts female characters, confined to the domestic space, they all survive and resist by being silent. Thusly, this article does not favour one over another, instead it presents the two feminist perspectives as being complementary to one another.

By analysing together Woolf's modernist feminist narrative along with Mushtaq's postcolonial feminist narrative, we can understand that feminisms are contextualised and temporal; while women's agency may be expressed either through writing or debate in one instance, in the other instance it may be represented through the ability to endure and to display fortitude. Consequently, the many forms of feminisms counter the idea of the universality of feminism and demonstrate the need to interpret the feminist experience in terms of cultural context.

### Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2011.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Eagleton, Mary. *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*. Blackwell, 1986.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Columbia UP, 1998.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale UP, 1979.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton UP, 2005.
- Marcus, Jane. *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman*. Ohio State UP, 1988.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Boundary 2*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1984, pp. 333-358.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. Routledge, 1985.

Mushtaq, Banu. *Heart Lamp*. Translated by Deepa Bhashthi, And Other Stories, 2025.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton UP, 1977.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271-313.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. Hogarth Press, 2000.