

The Architecture of Silence: Gendered Space, Voice, and Resistance in Banu Mushtaq's Heart Lamp*A Feminist Literary Reading of the 2025 International Booker Prize–Winning Story Collection***Dr. Sunman Kaur Bains**

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Abstract

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* (tr. Deepa Bhasthi, 2025), a collection of twelve stories composed in Kannada over three decades and awarded the International Booker Prize in 2025, offers a sustained meditation on the gendered architecture of domestic and communal life among Muslim and Dalit women in southern India. This paper undertakes a feminist literary reading of the collection, arguing that Mushtaq converts the ostensibly private, unremarkable spaces of the household — the kitchen, the prayer mat, the veranda, the marital bed — into contested political terrain where patriarchal, religious, and caste authority is simultaneously enacted and quietly contested. Drawing on intersectional feminist theory and on frameworks of voice and silence developed within postcolonial and subaltern feminist criticism, the paper examines three interlocking concerns in the text: the spatial politics of confinement and surveillance; the rhetoric of silence as a mode of agency rather than mere submission; and the intersection of gender with religious and caste identity as a compounding structure of vulnerability. The paper contends that *Heart Lamp* resists both the romanticised heroism of overt rebellion and the flattening victim-narrative often imposed on Muslim women in South Asian writing, offering instead what Mushtaq herself has called a literature of the unheard — protagonists who are, in her words, tactful rather than submissive. The paper situates the collection within the *Bandaya Sahitya* (protest literature) tradition of Kannada writing and within a broader lineage of feminist short fiction, and closes by considering the significance of translation itself as a feminist and political act.

Keywords: Banu Mushtaq; *Heart Lamp*; gender studies; Kannada literature; Muslim women; domestic space; intersectionality; subaltern voice; translation studies; *Bandaya Sahitya*

1. Introduction

When Banu Mushtaq and her translator Deepa Bhashti accepted the International Booker Prize in London in May 2025, the recognition marked several firsts at once: the first Kannada-language work, and the first short-story collection, to win the prize, and the first Indian translator to be so honoured. Beyond these milestones, however, *Heart Lamp* represents a significant intervention in the literary representation of gender in South Asia. Written across more than thirty years (1990–2023) and drawn from Mushtaq's decades of activism as a lawyer and campaigner for women's rights in Karnataka, the twelve stories collected here refuse the two most familiar modes available to writing about Muslim and Dalit women in the subcontinent: the register of spectacular victimhood, and the register of triumphant, externally legible rebellion. Mushtaq's women resist through smaller, more ambiguous registers — through irony, through the management of domestic ritual, through withheld speech — and it is this ambiguity that this paper takes as its central object of analysis.

This paper approaches *Heart Lamp* as a gender-studies text in the fullest sense: not simply a book about women, but a book that theorises, through its narrative form, how gender is produced, policed, and occasionally unsettled within the intimate architecture of household and community. The analysis proceeds in three movements. Section 2 considers the collection's treatment of domestic space as a disciplinary structure. Section 3 examines silence and indirection as forms of feminist agency, reading against the grain of criticism that equates resistance solely with audible defiance. Section 4 addresses the intersectional structure of the text, in which gender is never separable from religious identity, caste position, or economic precarity. Section 5 considers the politics of translation itself as a feminist practice, before the paper concludes by situating *Heart Lamp* within the longer tradition of Kannada protest writing.

2. The Household as Disciplinary Architecture

Feminist geography has long argued that domestic space is not a neutral backdrop to social life but an instrument of gendered discipline — a claim Mushtaq's fiction dramatises with unusual precision. Stories such as "Noorah's House" render the physical layout of the home — its doorways, its inner and outer rooms, its thresholds — as a spatial encoding of who may see, be

seen, speak, and move. The house in Mushtaq's fiction is rarely a refuge; it is a site where surveillance by husbands, mothers-in-law, and community elders is naturalised as care. This aligns with a broader feminist critique, articulated by theorists from Michel Foucault to feminist geographers building on his work, of domestic space as a site of internalised discipline rather than simple confinement: women in Mushtaq's stories are not merely locked in but trained to police themselves and one another.

Yet Mushtaq resists presenting this architecture as monolithic. Grandmothers, sisters-in-law, and children frequently puncture its authority through humour, gossip, or small subversions of ritual, suggesting that the household is less a sealed system than a constantly renegotiated one. The kitchen, the ja-namaz (prayer mat), and other recurring domestic objects function almost as characters in themselves, carrying the emotional and moral weight that the collection's title metaphor — the heart as a lamp sustaining a household through its own quiet burning — makes explicit. This reframing allows Mushtaq to locate heroism not in departure from the domestic but within it: her women hold families and communities together through labour that the text insists on making visible rather than treating as invisible background.

3. Silence, Indirection, and the Grammar of Resistance

A recurring critical temptation with fiction about oppressed women is to search for moments of overt rebellion and to read their absence as evidence of resignation. Heart Lamp actively resists this interpretive frame. Mushtaq has described her protagonists as "tactful, not submissive," finding their own ways to challenge what confines them without recourse to open confrontation. This paper argues that such tact should be read as a deliberate feminist narrative strategy rather than a limitation of the text's political imagination.

In stories such as those built around the image of the high-heeled shoe, physical discomfort and bodily constraint become a vocabulary through which interior resistance is legible to the reader even where it remains invisible to the story's other characters. This is consonant with subaltern feminist theory's long-standing concern with whether and how the subaltern woman can be heard within structures that pre-determine the terms of her speech: Mushtaq's fiction dramatises exactly this bind, and answers it not by inventing a voice that would be implausible within her social world, but by making silence itself narratively eloquent. The final story in the collection, in

which the narrator wryly asks her God to "come to earth as a woman" were the world to be created anew, exemplifies this register: its humour is inseparable from its critique, and its refusal of solemn martyrdom is itself a feminist claim to interpretive complexity.

4. Intersectionality: Gender, Faith, and Caste

Heart Lamp cannot be adequately read through gender alone. Mushtaq's women are specifically situated as Muslim and, in several stories, Dalit women within Karnataka, and the text is emphatic that patriarchal control operates in tandem with — rather than separately from — religious authority (the maulvi figures who recur across the collection) and caste hierarchy. Stories such as "Holy Cow" foreground the added precarity of interfaith desire within a climate of rising religious intolerance, while "Child Bride" indicts a custom that strips a girl of childhood in the name of religiously sanctioned marriage practice.

This layering exemplifies what intersectional feminist theory, developed by scholars including Kimberlé Crenshaw and extended within transnational feminist criticism by scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, identifies as the compounding — rather than merely additive — structure of oppression: a Muslim Dalit woman in Mushtaq's fiction is not doubly disadvantaged in a simple arithmetic sense but occupies a distinct structural position irreducible to gender or religion or caste considered separately. Mushtaq's own biography as a writer associated with the Bandaya Sahitya (protest literature) movement of 1970s–80s Karnataka, a movement critical of caste and class hierarchy that produced influential Dalit and Muslim writers, situates Heart Lamp within an established tradition of intersectional protest writing rather than presenting it as an isolated intervention.

5. Translation as Feminist Practice

The collection's passage into English cannot be treated as incidental to its gender politics. Deepa Bhashti's translation retains Kannada, Urdu, and Arabic terms untranslated, refusing the domesticating gloss that would render the text more immediately consumable to an Anglophone readership, and by her own account she immersed herself in Urdu-language media and instruction to better register the specific cultural world Mushtaq depicts rather than assimilating it to a generic idiom of South Asian womanhood. This is consistent with feminist translation

theory's insistence that translation is never a transparent act but one that can either flatten or preserve the specificity of gendered and cultural experience. That the International Booker judges described the translation itself as "radical" suggests that the text's feminist force is inseparable from the labour of its transmission across languages — a reminder that gender studies readings of translated fiction must attend to the translator's interpretive choices as part of the text's meaning, not merely as a neutral conduit to it.

6. Conclusion

Heart Lamp offers gender studies scholarship a valuable corrective to two persistent tendencies: the tendency to read Muslim women's lives in South Asia solely through the lens of victimhood, and the competing tendency to valorise only visible, confrontational forms of resistance as authentically feminist. Mushtaq's stories insist instead on a third register — women who endure, negotiate, and occasionally outwit the structures that confine them through means that are quiet, domestic, and frequently comic, without those means being any less politically substantial for their quietness. Read alongside its own history as protest literature and alongside the specific feminist labour of its translation, Heart Lamp emerges not simply as a chronicle of suffering but as an argument, made through form as much as through content, about where women's agency is permitted to be seen.

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