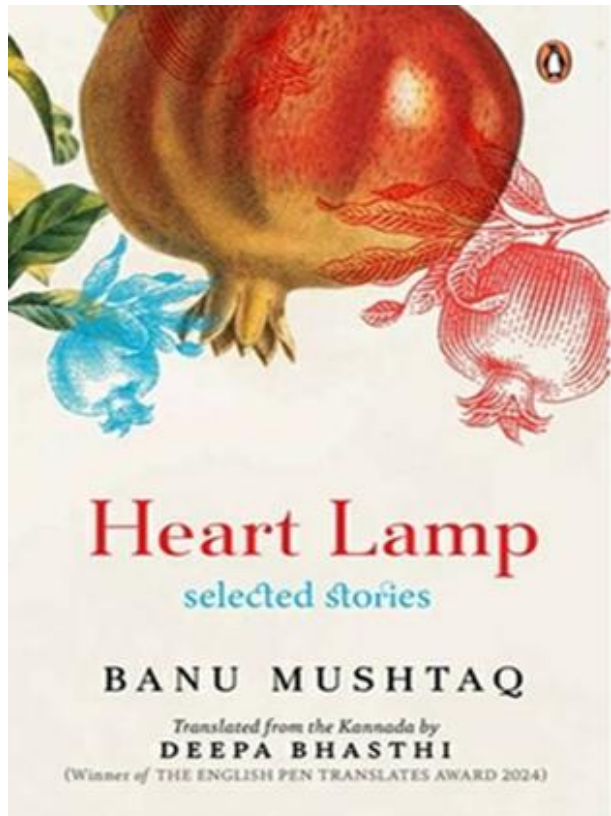

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2025, ISBN-13 :978-9367902295 , Pages: 246, Paper back: Rs. 248/-

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“Do you know who gets justice? Only those who demand it. People like you will not get justice if you don't demand it.” — Banu Mushtaq.

This is such an impressive statement of *Heart Lamp*, not just a line of dialogue, but the moral and political pivot around which the whole work moves. Certainly, *Heart Lamp* is one of the most outstanding works in modern world literature, not just because it is recognised in history as the 2025 International Booker Prize winner, but also because of the overwhelming re-centrifugation of the narratives of regional Indian women in the world literary imagination. This story collection was originally written in Kannada (translated



into English by Deepa Bhashti). The collection is steeped in the extraordinary emotions and politics of stories such as *Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal*, *Fire Rain*, *Black Cobras*, *A Decision of the Heart*, *Red Lungis*, *Heart Lamp*, *High-Heeled Shoe*, *Soft Whispers*, *A Taste of Heaven*, *The Shroud*, *The Arabic Teacher* and *Gobi Manchuri*, and *Be a Woman Once*, *Oh Lord*, which explore the unsaid struggles, resistance and realities of Muslim women.

It was the first short story collection, as well as the first work in Kannada, to win the International Booker Prize. This is not merely institutional validation but a literary rectification, the recognition that the future of world literature must not lie in metropolitan hegemony but in the delicate rediscovery of local voices, particularly those historically oppressed by language, gender, and class. Mushtaq has been known to the Kannada literary

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circles for a long time because of her bold approach in covering the life of Muslim women, domestic violence, the patriarchal set-ups and the emotional labour that goes unnoticed in normal life. In *Heart Lamp*, these issues are not addressed as sociological case studies or turned into heart-rending melodrama. Instead, they are made with a literary exactness, a psychological delicacy and an astonishing fidelity to the truth of emotions. Even the title *Heart Lamp* is a very deep metaphor. A lamp is a symbol of light, and of weakness, of a fire that burns in the wind and the darkness. The heart implies not only emotion, but thought, recollection and inner resistance. Combined, the words create the image of women who are so weakly hanging on and yet still perceiving and living in a system that is created to shut them down. The entire collection is governed by this iconic architecture. The stories of Mushtaq are founded on intimacy as opposed to overtly political fiction, which anticipates ideology. Home cooking, marriages, and family meetings, silence, rites, and speech silence are all places of politics. Her women are neither heroic, in the usual sense, nor are they victims. They inhabit contradiction. They are usually passive, partial and ethically ambivalent ways. But it is this rejection of the simplification that makes the collection so wonderfully literary. The feminist vision of Mushtaq is particularly strong with the help of lines that seem so simple, but are so devastating. In what is perhaps the most resonant of the reflections in this collection, a child questions, "Can one eat pain, Dadima?" The grandmother replies, "One must eat pain and bring happiness," (Mushtaq). This short dialogue summarises the emotional work that is passed down to women of both generations, where the pain should be hidden, and the comfort should be provided externally. In this case, the suffering is not a tragedy, but it is a discipline. With the help of sparsity of prose, moral intricacy, and extraordinary emotional restraint, *Heart Lamp* does not merely constitute a collection of tales, but it is a philosophical exploration of how women endure forms of erasure. It is a novel that makes the domestic epic without leaving behind realism.

Stories without Spectacle

Heart Lamp is a story that draws its strength through compression, unlike novels that are based on dramatic advancement. Every story comes into a moving life and goes away before the finality comes. Such structural lack is the structural incompleteness of lived reality; oppression hardly ever has a happy resolution, and emotional trauma does not get solved within the convenience of the narrative. Each narrative has women characters who are mothers, daughters, wives, widows and passive witnesses to the injustices of the past. They inhabit the domestic sphere that is shaped by religious, family honour, economic and social conditions. However, Mushtaq refuses to make them a sociological figure. Even in the matter of being trapped in the structures of suffering, each of them has psychological individuality. Marriage is repeated in various forms, not as a love story, but as an institution and, in a way,

it is sustained by emotional dysfunction and gendered sacrifice. The house, usually conceptualised as a shelter, has turned into a war zone where no one speaks, where love is forced. Surveillance can be a part of domestic intimacy. Mushtaq's articulation of this spiritual process of language is psychologically powerful: "The distance between them became even greater. Who would guide over the silence's abyss?" Silence here is the absence of words, but it becomes the scheme of the family's disintegration. What is interesting is that Mushtaq has not staged the freedom movement as a black and white issue. Freedom comes not in big ways. A quiet woman, one who does not forgive, a mother who realises that she is tired, all these are examples of ethical resistance. The stories confirm that it is hard to survive. The role of the religious institutions in the collection is also important. Mushtaq shows that rather than questioning faith, the institutional moralities are often used to control gender. Women are asked to carry virtue as men pass on the power. However, the stories are not in accord with ideological reduction. Custom is not presented as a monolith but as a reality that is lived, in which violence and love often co-exist.

They enhance the emotional stakes of the narratives and illustrate how oppression is passed not just by the law or ritual but also by hereditary emotional grammar. These are non-spectacle stories, which are not devoid of intensity. Mushtaq writes, "The chasm between them grew wider. What voice could bridge the cracks that were caused by silence?" Mushtaq does not agree with the idealisation of patriarchy and its liberal simplification. Her women are not slogans or saints. They are conflicting, hurt, insightful and can be very ethically complicated. Feminine victimhood and empowerment are the two binary concepts that play out in many literary texts concerning women. She disapproves of this structure altogether.

Women Who Refuse Simplification

Her heroes are not created in order to represent feminism, but rather exist as human beings. They balance on, harbour resentments, shield injustice and yet are deeply sympathetic. The emotional intelligence of these characters is phenomenal. The fact that the knowledge does not bring freedom, on some occasions, it adds to the suffering, is politically brought to a point in the statement: "Do you know who receives justice? On demand only: only those who demand it." The line turns individual misery into social misery, and it is implied that silence is not innocence but is a social conditioning that is being imposed on women.

This literary excellence particularly gives special emphasis to motherhood. Instead of an emotive fulfilment, it is introduced as a state of pathos emotional work. One of the stinging feminist criticisms of the collection is the anticipation of self-erasure in maternal identity. Male characters are not depicted as single villains but as an incarnation of an institutionalised

power. The structures of fathers, husbands, brothers and clerics are often the manifestation of cruelty, not of an individual kind. It is not through spectacle but by habit that patriarchy lives, and the silence can be considered a character itself. Things not spoken, particularly by women, are often truest in their emotions. Discussions are characterised by interruption, inhibition and politics of the unsayable. These women are not in search of literary pity; they are seeking acknowledgement. The fact that they are incomplete renders them true.

Gender Pain and Metaphysical Protest

The most spectral aspect of *Heart Lamp* is how it changes individual anguish into metaphysical outcry. The women in the world of Mushtaq are not the victims of oppression; they question the ethics of the world that tolerates oppression. And this is vehemently brought out in the heart-rending cry: “If you were to build the world again... come to earth as a woman, Prabhu! Be a woman once, oh Lord!” It is not merely a wish to God that patriarchy was not so, but it is an indictment levelled at divinity itself. Even God cannot avoid the invocation, as the embodied female suffering is not only social but also theological. Equally, Mushtaq reinvents the very concept of beauty through pain. She says, “Not all blooms have the fortune of adorning a bride; some flowers bloom only for mausoleums.” The femininity is turned into an elegy by this metaphor. Womanhood, in this case, is not linked to satisfaction, but to sacrifice and burial of emotions in a ritualised manner. The use of such lines uplifts the collection to a literary testimony rather than realism. The narratives are based on the normal home life, but the emotionality is philosophical. Suffering turns into words, life turns into wisdom.

Language, Translation, Literary Ethics

The Heart Lamp is a literary success mainly due to its English translation by Deepa Bhashti. Translation is no secondary work; it is a cultural and political obligation. Bhashti retains the Kannada feel of the stories and does not refreeze them in an apolitical global English. This is important since, in most cases, the literature that is translated is over-smoothed, and the language is readable at the expense of culture. In *Heart Lamp*, social grain is retained in English, though. Oral rhythm, emotional cadence, and local epistemology are carried in the syntax. The narrations have the sound of translation, and this is their merit. This translation is in opposition to the colonial belief that English should be transparent and universal. Rather, the English language turns plural and morally unsettled. It should not be a means of erasing difference but of accommodating. The very prose of Mushtaq is restrained. The purity of the sentences, their accuracy, and their emotional shattering are exquisitely achieved by the denial of theatricality. Suffering is expressed in detail and not proclamation. Such stylistic

sparseness is reminiscent of authors like Ismat Chughtai and Alice Munro, in which emotional colour is created through a focus on observation, not on rhetoric. But Mushtaq is totally different in her focus on the inner world of Muslim women in the context of South Indian cultures. It involves the readers engaging in emotional inference as opposed to passive consumption. What comes out of this is fiction that is confident in the intellect of its audience.

Criticism and International Literary Significance

The 2025 International Booker Prize, awarded to *Heart Lamp*, changed the compilation of the local literary excellence into a literary phenomenon on the international level. Critics gave high accolades to the work because of the richness in its theme as well as its structural subtlety and emotional accuracy. As mentioned by reviewers, the win was a historical event as it increased the global awareness of Indian fiction beyond the Anglophone. Kannada literature has not found its way into the international literary discourse as which is a marginal interest but rather as a core form of artistic accomplishment. The feminist politics of collection has attracted the special attention of scholars. The stories of Mushtaq have to labour through contradiction as opposed to the manifesto-driven feminist writing. This has been complicated enough to enable the text to be heard across cultures without being any less specific. The rejection of linguistic difference by Bhashti has also been lauded by the scholars of translation studies. The book has been taken as a significant model of how translation can be used as a decolonial literary practice and not cultural assimilation. Critics have remarked on the repetition of the themes in the stories, especially on marriage, domestic oppression and the silence of the female. However, this repetition can be interpreted structurally as opposed to being critical. The reason why oppression is repeated is due to its repetition in society. The repetition is narrative and turns into social realism. *Heart Lamp* is not only significant because of its prize but also its intervention. It avers that the seriousness of literature is the same in short fiction, in regional language writing and in the writing of the interior of women. It reminds the world community that it is not through abstraction that universality is attained, but through precision.

Final Considerations

The Heart Lamp of Banu Mushtaq is a wonderful literary creation. It weaves the commonplace domesticity into a philosophical and political exploration without losing narrative closeness. The trick of it is in its refusal of simplification. The stories believe in silence, ambivalence and contradictions. In the kitchen, marriage, rituals and silence, Mushtaq can show how power is best used, how it works, through the mundane. The patriarchy isn't presented in terms of violent crime, but the repetition, expectation and the form of emotion. The motif of the lamp

is succinct. The translation ensures that the lamp doesn't get extinguished in it. In fact, *Heart Lamp* is one of the most important works of recent literature and establishes Banu Mushtaq as one of the figures of modern literature. Its International Booker fame is, in this sense, no less than welcome; it is long overdue. *Heart Lamp* offers much more than the spectacle and size so often fetishised in a literary culture, the dignity of survival.

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