



VEDA'S

JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

Impact Factor (SJIF) 6.002

<http://www.joell.in>

Vol.13, No.3

(July-Sept.)

2026

RESEARCH ARTICLE



SMALL FLAMES, PERSISTENT LIGHT: WOMEN'S AGENCY AND EVERYDAY RESISTANCE IN BANU MUSHTAQ'S *HEART LAMP*

ANJALI

Assistant Professor (Guest), Aryabhata College, Delhi University.

Email: vatsanjali2@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13310>

ABSTRACT



Article history:

Received on: 25-06-2026

Accepted on: 21-07-2026

Available online: 29-07-2026

What does resistance look like when it has no name, when it wears the face of submission, inhabits the grammar of silence, and moves through the cracks of a world not built for it? Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*: the first short story collection to win the International Booker Prize (2025), set among Muslim communities in Karnataka; it looks like a grandmother's grief over a prayer mat, a sister waiting decades for an inheritance withheld behind a shield of religious duty, and a mother enduring her own feelings in silence, which the world mistakes for consent. It does not like rebellion. And that, this paper argues, is precisely the point. Drawing on intersectional and postcolonial feminist frameworks—Mohanty (1988), Spivak (1988), Collins (2000), Hooks (1984), and Simon (1996)—this paper locates women's agency not in dramatic defiance but in the textures of daily life: negotiated space, managed silence, and the refusal to be consumed by the roles assigned to them. The intersectional frame is not an academic imposition but a structural necessity: Mushtaq's women are shaped simultaneously by gender, class, caste, religion, and language, and this layered subjection charges their endurance with political significance. *Heart Lamp* does not merely represent marginalized voices but also disrupts the dominant discourses that rendered them inaudible. Translator Deepa Bhasthi's practice of 'translating with an accent' is itself a feminist act of recovery. *Heart Lamp* does not set the world on fire. It keeps a small flame burning—in cramped kitchens, in half-spoken prayers, in the quiet insistence of women who will not disappear entirely. This paper argues that it is enough. More than enough.

Keywords: *Intersectional Feminism, Subaltern Voice, Postcolonial Feminist Theory, Everyday Resistance, Feminist Translation, Dominant Discourse, Women's Agency*

Author(s) retain the copyright of this article. Copyright© 2026 VEDA Publications.

Author(s) agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License.



INTRODUCTION: THE LITERATURE OF THE UNSPECTACULAR

In May 2025, the judges of the International Booker Prize described Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* as a collection that 'slices through the fault lines of caste, class, and religion,' giving voice to girls and women 'on the periphery of society' (Booker Prize Foundation 2025). This was not merely literary praise; rather, a recognition that the text performs something politically consequential: it insists that lives lived simultaneously at the intersection of multiple hierarchies are worthy of sustained literary attention. The remark is worth dwelling on, because the periphery it names is not a single margin but a compound one. It is a place where gender is always already inflected by caste, class, religion, and language and where the subject who inhabits it cannot be adequately seen through any one lens alone.

There is a particular kind of story that literature has historically struggled to tell: not the story of the heroine who escapes or the revolutionary who burns the old order to the ground, but the story of the woman who stays, one who endures, who negotiates, and who, in that quiet negotiation, asserts something irreducibly her own. Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* is a book full of such stories, written over thirty years, selected with curatorial intention by translator Deepa Bhasthi from a body of approximately fifty short stories. The collection arrives with the dual weight of historical literary distinction and urgent contemporary relevance.

Mushtaq herself has spoken with characteristic directness about the collection's central

preoccupation: her stories concern women, "how religion, society, and politics demand unquestioning obedience from them, and in doing so, inflict inhumane cruelty upon them, turning them into mere subordinates" (Mushtaq, in Booker Interview, 2025). This paper reads that preoccupation through a rigorously intersectional frame, asking how everyday acts that are unnamed, unwitnessed, and unsung function as resistance and, further, how the intersectional dimensions of Mushtaq's characters' lives illuminate, in a way that single-axis analysis cannot, the specific mechanisms by which dominant discourses are reproduced and disrupted.

As Areeb Ahmad observes in his *Words Without Borders* review (2025), "the collection engages themes of patriarchy, class, and caste with remarkable intimacy, precisely because Mushtaq writes from within her community rather than about it from the outside." This positionality is both the text's ethical foundation and its literary strength, and it positions *Heart Lamp* at the productive intersection of testimony, craft, and feminist argument.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative feminist close reading of the twelve stories compiled in the translated *Heart Lamp* collection. The methodological foundation of this paper would be close reading with distinct attention to voice, silence, narrative structure, domestic space, irony, and the politics of the unsaid. The theoretical framework is explicitly intersectional and postcolonial, and the paper makes no apology for its multiplicity: to read Mushtaq's women through one framework at a time would be to replicate the very reductive gaze the text resists.



Following Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), intersectionality is understood here as the simultaneous operation of gender, class, caste, and religion in producing and constraining women's lives; not as a checklist of disadvantages but as a matrix in which each axis of power shapes and is shaped by the others. Following Mohanty (1988), this paper is also alert to the risk of homogenizing 'Third World Women' into a monolithic category defined by victimhood and reads Mushtaq's characters instead as specific, contradictory, and irreducibly individual. Spivak's foundational question, "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (1988), haunts the paper's engagement with silence: not as absence but as a mode of communication, strategy, and self-preservation. Bell Hook's attention to the matrix of gender and social location (1984) provides a further lens through which to understand how these women have been shaped themselves in return.

It is this intersectional lens that most forcefully illuminates how marginalized voices in *Heart Lamp* disrupt dominant discourses. The dominant discourses Mushtaq engages, which are patriarchal authority, religious legitimacy, class hierarchy, caste structure, and linguistic hierarchy, do not operate independently. They are entangled, and it is through that entanglement that they achieve their power over women's lives. But it is also through that entanglement that women find unexpected openings: the pious brother's deployment of religious authority over property rights is simultaneously a class and gender move, and Mushtaq's narrative strategy exposes the seam where these discourses meet, making visible the machinery that a single-axis reading would leave intact.

Finally, Sherry Simon's feminist translation theory (1996) informs the paper's reading of Deepa Bhasthi's translation practice as a political and gendered act, as one that extends the project of feminist recovery from the story's origin in Kannada to its circulation in the global English literary marketplace.

MUSHTAQ'S WORLD: THE ETHICS AND AUTHORITY OF WRITING FROM WITHIN

To reach *Heart Lamp* with the attention it deserves, one must first understand Banu Mushtaq's relationship to the world she writes about. She is not an observer but rather a researcher, an anthropologist, and a novelist writing the Other into being from a position of comfortable distance. She is a Kannada-speaking Muslim woman from Karnataka who came of age within the Bandaya Sahitya movement, a progressive protest literary circle of southwestern India in the 1970s and 1980s that was sharply critical of caste and class hierarchies (Booker Prize Foundation 2025). Within that movement, she was one of the handful of women writers, a fact that speaks, with quiet irony, to the gendered dynamics of even the most ostensibly progressive literary spaces.

She is also a practicing lawyer. The women in her stories are, in many cases, women she has encountered professionally, such as women seeking divorce, women disputing property rights, and women navigating the institutions of Islamic personal law. As Ahmad (2025) notes, "this legal intimacy gives the collection an ethnographic grounding that fiction alone rarely achieves." Mushtaq's writing is not speculative or documentary: it is closely observed, legally literate, and morally serious in the way that



only writing rooted in direct encounter with lived consequence can be.

This positionality matters particularly in the context of Mohanty's influential critique (1988) of how women from non-Western contexts are frequently represented in Western feminist discourse, which is as a homogenous, ahistorical category defined entirely by oppression, stripped of specificity, agency, and contradiction. Mushtaq's women resist that flattening at every turn. They are not interchangeable figures of suffering but individuals with histories, specific relationships, particular forms of wit, desire, and endurance. The grandmother who grieves over a prayer mat is not a symbol of Muslim female piety: she is a woman with a body, a history, and an unacknowledged interior life that the text insists, with ethical urgency, that we attend to.

That insistence is itself a disruption of a dominant discourse, one that makes invisible the individual subjectivities of women from multiple marginalized communities by assimilating them into the abstract category of 'the oppressed. Mushtaq's refusal of that subsumption is not only a literary choice but a political one.

THE HOME AS CONTESTED GROUND: DOMESTIC SPACE AND NEGOTIATED AUTHORITY

One of the most persistent assumptions in feminist literary criticism is that the domestic space, such as the home, the kitchen, and the bedroom, is the primary site of women's oppression. And of course it is, in consequential ways: unpaid labour is extracted there; women's mobility is curtailed there; the hierarchies of gender are rehearsed and enforced

there in the intimate register of daily life. Mushtaq does not flinch from showing this. But she does something more complicated and ultimately more instructive: she shows how the home is simultaneously a space of negotiation, micro-authority, and emotional management so sophisticated that it constitutes a form of mastery that is both invisible and unrecognized, and for that reason, uninterrupted.

The women in *Heart Lamp* are rarely passive in their domestic lives. They manage, which is to say, they strategize. They know which battles are worth fighting for and which to hold in reserve. They cultivate alliances, manage their husbands' egos, protect their children, and preserve their own interior lives through the careful governance of what they reveal and what they withhold. Arlie Hochschild's concept of emotional labour (1983) is precisely illuminating here: Mushtaq's women absorb anger, deflect humiliation, and metabolize grief on behalf of everyone around them, while being granted almost no space to articulate their own experience in return. This is not a neutral burden. It is one that is extracted; and the extraction is gendered.

The intersectional dimension of this domestic landscape, as we see, is crucial. The domestic authority available to Mushtaq's women: whatever room to maneuver they have is itself shaped by class, caste, and religious position. A woman with economic means can negotiate differently from a woman without it. A widow's authority in her own household is not the same as a wife's. One of the characters of the story titled '*A Taste of Heaven*' is Bi Dadi—a woman whose entire life of care has been rendered invisible, whose grief over the loss of a



prayer mat encodes decades of unacknowledged selfhood, is not simply a woman: she is an elderly woman, which multiplies her invisibility and intensifies the political weight of the text's act of witnessing. Mushtaq's narration grants her grief the attention the community withholds. The feminist argument is hence not stated but performed.

EVERYDAY FEMINISM: THE POLITICS OF ORDINARY RESILIENCE

We do not see Mushtaq in her book presenting any dramatic rebellion. Mushtaq is not writing characters who have read Beauvoir or who organize themselves around a political identity. Her characters are ordinary women living within the constraints of their world, doing what they can with what they have. Her characters do not escape or triumph in any conventional narrative sense. What she offers instead is what we might call everyday feminism: a feminism embedded in the choices and endureances of daily life, visible not in grand gestures but in the quality of a woman's attention to her own experience and in her refusal to fully accept the diminishment her world proposes for her.

The story of the sister who was denied her inheritance by her pious brother is perhaps the collection's most politically direct treatment of this theme and its most withering intersection of gender, religion, and class authority. The brother, respected in his religious community, considered a man of probity, delays her claim repeatedly, each time retreating behind the language of religious obligation—a dead man must be interred in the correct cemetery; a ritual demands observance; God's business takes precedence over a living

woman's rights. The irony is devastating and precise. Religious authority, mobilized in devotion to the divine, cannot find the time or will to serve a living woman to whom it owes a legal and moral debt. Mushtaq doesn't editorialize. She does not need to. The narrative structure instead is the argument.

This is Mushtaq's method throughout, and it is what most clearly demonstrates how her narrative strategies function as disruptions of dominant discourse. She does not explain the injustice; she enacts it. She does not direct the reader's feeling; she creates the narrative conditions in which feeling becomes unavoidable. By embedding the feminist critique in the texture of the story—in the specific detail of a delayed burial, a missing brother, a woman waiting at the edge of a conversation that concerns her own life; she makes the critique undeniable without rendering it reducible. The dominant discourse cannot absorb or dismiss what it cannot locate as argument.

TRANSLATION AS RECOVERY: A FEMINIST AND POLITICAL ACT

No account of *Heart Lamp* in its English form is complete without attending to the work of its translator, Deepa Bhashi, who has described her practice as 'translating with an accent'—a translation that does not erase the foreignness of the original, that does not domesticate Mushtaq's Kannada rhythms and registers into smooth, unaccented English prose for frictionless consumption (Bhashi 2025). As Sherry Simon argues in *Gender in Translation* (1996), feminist translation is concerned with making visible what patriarchal culture has suppressed, and Bhashi's choices consistently



foreground the cultural specificity of Mushtaq's world rather than smoothing it for a Western readership.

This is itself an intersectional and political choice. To translate without accent is to imply that the original has no idiom, no location, and no culture; that it could have been written anywhere by anyone. To translate with one is to insist that the text comes from somewhere particular, that its women are specific rather than universal in the homogenizing sense that Mohanty's critique targets so precisely. The English text's occasional syntactic unfamiliarity, the moments where a phrase does not resolve the way English phrases typically do are not failures of translation. They are instead reminders that we are guests in a world that has its own grammar, its own logic of feeling, and its own terms for what matters.

The act of translation also has a structural dimension within the politics of literary visibility. Mushtaq has been writing in Kannada for thirty years, making a substantial body of work celebrated within its regional literary tradition that had no presence in global circulation until Bhashi's translation brought it to international attention, and the International Booker Prize amplified it to the world. This in turn also raises questions that the paper can acknowledge but not fully resolve. Questions such as whose literary traditions are considered worthy of universality? Whose language carries cultural prestige? Bhashi's work transcends mere language translation; it constitutes a feminist reclamation that challenges the hierarchies of literary authority—hierarchies that, like to all prevailing discourses, are vulnerable to disruption.

THE HEART LAMP AS METAPHOR: A CONCLUDING READING

The Kannada title, *Edeya Hanate*, translates literally as 'lamp of the heart' or 'heart lamp.' In Karnataka's cultural landscape, lamps are both domestic and devotional objects; lit at thresholds, at altars, in kitchens, and before icons and photographs of the beloved dead. To light a lamp is to perform an act of care, of remembrance, of vigil. A lamp kept burning through the night is a refusal to let darkness claim the space entirely.

The title is the collection's organizing metaphor, and it is closest to what Mushtaq is trying to do. Her women are heart lamps: small, domestic, and unspectacular. They do not illuminate the whole world. They illuminate a room, a relationship, a moment. But they persist. They burn in the absence of any guarantee that anyone is watching. They burn because to stop would be to accept an extinction that has not been earned. In the words of critic Lucy Popescu writing for the *Financial Times* (2025), the collection "decries subjugation and celebrates resilience"—a statement that encapsulates the dual dynamics of Mushtaq's feminist perspective: it not only laments what patriarchy deprives women of but also simultaneously illuminates the resilience that persists.

Heart Lamp is hence a feminist text not because it announces itself as one, not because it deploys the language of feminist theory, and not because its characters triumph over their circumstances in any legible narrative arc. It is a feminist text because it refuses to let these women disappear. It holds each of them in the light— the light they generate, the light



they carry, the light that burns inside them without being seen and says: Look. This is a life. This is what it costs. This is what it is worth.

CONCLUSION

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* arrives at a moment of genuine significance for world literature; a moment in which texts from regional languages and non-Western traditions are beginning to receive the international recognition they have long deserved. The collection's Booker Prize is, among other things, an argument about the kind of stories that matter, and the fact that the winning text is a collection of short stories by a Muslim woman writing about women is not incidental. It is the point.

Heart Lamp is a narrative by a woman about women. Its engagement with gender roles is embedded in the fabric of each story. Its feminism is the kind that does not need to name itself. Its exploration of personal agency is nuanced enough to accommodate the reality that agency, for most women in most contexts, is not absolute or dramatic, but partial, negotiated, and therefore all the more significant when it appears.

Most importantly, *Heart Lamp* makes its arguments the way the best kind of literature always does; not by telling us what to think, but by making us feel what is at stake. In a crowded kitchen in Karnataka, in a prayer mat's loss, in a sister's finally fraying patience, in an address to God that will be never answered—in all of these, Mushtaq keeps a flame burning. This paper tries to say what kind of persistent flame that is.

WORKS CITED

- Abid, Ahmed Areeb. "The Heart's Shaped Nib." *23: A Debut Collection of Personal Essays, Poems, and Music Reviews*, Notion Press, 2026.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2010.
- Booker Prize Foundation. "Everything You Need to Know About Heart Lamp, Winner of the International Booker Prize 2025." *The Booker Prizes*, 20 May 2025, <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/everything-to-know-heart-lamp-winner-international-booker-prize-2025>.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2000.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. 3rd ed., University of California Press, 2012.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 1984.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review*, vol. 30, 1988, pp. 61–88.
- Mushtaq, Banu. *Heart Lamp*. Translated by Deepa Bhasthi, And Other Stories, 2024. [1, 2]
- Popescu, Lucy. Review of *Heart Lamp*, by Banu Mushtaq. *Financial Times*, 2025.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Towards a Feminist Poetics." *Women's Writing and Writing about Women*, edited by Mary Jacobus, Croom Helm, 1979.
- Simon, Sherry. *Gender in Translation*. Routledge, 2003.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.