

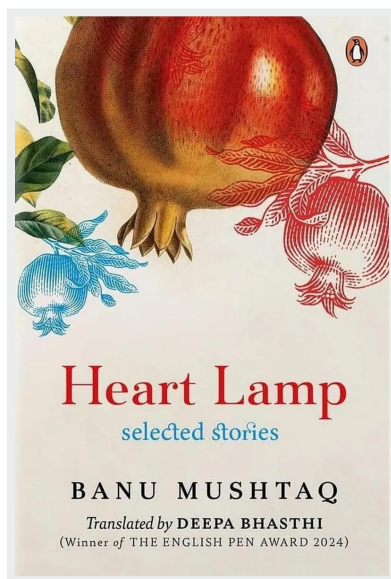
Heart Lamp

Author: *Banu Mushtaq*

Publisher: *Penguin*

Year: 2025

Reviewer: *Gaurav J. Pathania*¹



The International Booker prize 2025 winner is *Heart Lamp* by Banu Mushtaq translated from Kannada to English by Deepa Bhasthi. *Heart Lamp*, a literal translation of the Kannada term *hridaya deepa*, is a radiant collection of twelve stories that illuminate the inner lives of women in Muslim communities of southern India, capturing the quiet yet pervasive pressures of patriarchy, religious tradition, class, and belonging through prose that is both spare and resonant. What distinguishes the collection is its steady refusal to treat Muslim identity as monolithic: Mushtaq's characters inhabit social hierarchies, moral contradictions, and multiple registers of belonging, and it is precisely in these tensions that the possibility of critique emerges. Mushtaq constructs her narratives through an intersectional lens, engaging not only with gender but also with the dynamics of class, caste, and religion.

Across its twelve stories, one of *Heart Lamp*'s greatest strengths is Mushtaq's ability to transform ordinary domestic scenes into moments that unsettle moral certainties. The title story, "*Heart Lamp*," portrays a married woman with children whose dreams of continuing her studies are stifled as she struggles against her family's patriarchal and traditional expectations. "As evening started to lose its light, lamps were lit around the house. But the lamp in Mehurn's heart had been extinguished a long time ago. Who should she live for?" (p. 108). In "*Black Cobras*," a woman abandoned

¹Assistant Professor of Sociology and Peacebuilding at the Eastern Mennonite University, Virginia, USA
E-mail: gaurav.pathania@emu.edu

by her husband confronts a mosque authority (*mutawalli*) to demand sustenance for her children, only to be dismissed until she stages a public protest. “*A Decision of the Heart*” explores the severe tensions of married life, reducing a woman’s fate to two bleak options: “The first option was to give talaq to Akhila... the second option was to marry another woman to punish Akhila” (p. 71). In another story, “*Fire Rain*,” Mushtaq exposes how a clergyman twists religious doctrine to deny women their rights, weaving rumor, gossip, and communal pressure into a sharp allegory of unchecked spiritual authority. Through subtle narrative compression and moments of tonal irony, Mushtaq reveals how forces of shame, obligation, and hierarchy shape women’s lives long before violence becomes visible.

While Mushtaq foregrounds religion, she does not entirely evade the question of caste among Muslims. In some stories the hierarchies seem implicit: women belonging to “lesser” Muslim households or those doing menial labor must address elders or mosque authorities in deferential tones, while more educated women navigate normative pieties more confidently. The translator’s note suggests that caste is part of this landscape of social distance even within Muslim communities, though the stories seldom stage caste as a central conflict. There is fertile ground here: for example, how “purity”, a concept typically associated with Hindu caste discourse, may migrate into Muslim households in terms of “respectable” lineage, endogamy, or social ranking tied to occupational histories (e.g. housekeeping, pious lineage). Mushtaq hints at these gradations but rarely lets them dominate the narrative; perhaps this is a deliberate reticence, a recognition that within her communities, such caste distinctions are lived and understood rather than loudly contested.

Deepa Bhashti’s translation merits special recognition. By leaving Arabic, Urdu, and Kannada terms untranslated—and refraining from footnotes or italics—she preserves the cadence of regional speech while refusing to flatten cultural specificity for Anglophone readers. Her refusal to mark these terms as “foreign” subtly resists colonial translation practices that otherize linguistic differences. Yet this choice carries trade-offs: readers unfamiliar with the cultural context may feel unsettled by the untranslated vocabulary or unspoken references. At certain moments, too, a firmer editorial hand might have helped; abrupt tonal shifts—for example, when a story of simmering tension veers suddenly into satire—can feel jarring rather than propulsive.

Another limitation lies in uneven attention to wider structural forces. Many stories focus intimately on individuals and their immediate relational worlds, husbands, mosque elders, neighbors—but less on political economy, electoral power, or legal institutions. For instance, when a woman seeks mosque support or claim under Sharia, the stories often bypass the broader institutional logics that enable or frustrate her claim. This is not necessarily a flaw—Mushtaq’s strength is in subtle detail—but it means that readers seeking more systemic critique may find the collection wanting.

Moreover, because the narrative lens is so often interior and personal, *Heart Lamp* occasionally risks reiteration: the oppressive husband, the silent shame, the thwarted voice appears across multiple stories, and some vignettes echo one another in their texture if not in plot. The power is cumulative, but for readers attuned to structure, a

few stories feel more necessary than others. A slightly tighter editorial shaping could heighten the collection's overall arc.

As one engages with this work, an inevitable set of questions arises: in what ways can literary texts more clearly reveal the workings of caste within Muslim social life, particularly in relation to Hindu-majority hierarchies? How do structures such as Islamic schooling, land ownership, or mosque governance sustain, or challenge, forms of caste-like stratification? Mushtaq's understated, empathetic narratives gesture toward these dilemmas without offering resolution, which seems to be her very intent: to provoke reflection rather than deliver admonition.

In sum, *Heart Lamp* is a richly layered, morally perceptive, and stylistically restrained collection whose power lies in its intimate perspective. The acknowledgment of more than 900 individuals speaks to the writer's deep social capital, while the translator's careful labor shines through each story. The book gives voice to women obscured by pious façades, brings into focus the gulf between devotion and authority, and points toward entrenched inequalities, including caste, within Muslim communities. Its achievement lies not in offering resolution, but in compelling us to dwell in the tension, to breathe with it, and to feel the lamp's fragile yet persistent glow in the dark.