

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Of women, rage, and what burns unseen

Review of 'Heart Lamp: Selected Stories' (And Other Stories, 2025) by Banu Mushtaq, translated by Deepa Bhasthi

Again and again, we witness women trying to reclaim control: some wanting to undergo sterilisation without their husbands' permission, some demand their right to inheritance, others quietly but firmly refuse to return to homes where they've endured years of mental and physical abuse. These are not grand acts of revolution, but small rebellions of survival, each one cutting into the social fabric that seeks to bind them.

MAHMUDA EMDAD

"Hakhaara tarise toh angaar ka nuuh barse..."
(If the one who has rights is displeased, a rain of fire will fall)

—This quote, from the story "Fire Rain" in *Heart Lamp*, sets the emotional temperature of the entire collection.

There are books that try to rebuild the world. There are books that try to explain it. And then there are books that do neither; they just hold up a mirror. *Heart Lamp* is that mirror. It does not seek to heal or to reconcile. It simply insists you look. It speaks of smoldering anger—not the kind that explodes, but the kind that simmers in silence, tucked away inside generations of women who have been denied dignity, voice, and justice. Banu Mushtaq writes about the displeased; about those whose pain society has normalised, whose lives are shaped by absence: of choice, of power, of recognition.

Heart Lamp, which recently won the 2025 Man Booker Prize, is a curated collection of 12 short stories written between the 1990s and 2023. Selected from the best of Mushtaq's literary career, these stories center the everyday lives of women from Kannada—particularly Dalit and Muslim women—whose experiences are shaped by caste, religion, poverty, and gendered violence. The collection's core themes include reproductive rights, patriarchy, societal traditions, and the subtle yet violent mechanisms that control and erase women's agency.

The opening story, "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal", lays the foundation for the collection's recurring themes: reproductive injustice, domestic labour, and the normalised disposability of women. Shaista, a woman who bears seven children in quick succession, dies soon after childbirth. But her death barely disrupts the rhythm of her husband's life; he remarries a younger woman to care for the children, stops his eldest daughter's education to manage the household, and moves on. The story doesn't dramatise this; it simply presents it, as if to say: this is what happens, every day, everywhere. In "Fire Rain", Mushtaq turns her focus toward inheritance and religious hypocrisy. The story revolves around the Mutawali Sahib—a man tasked with overseeing religious matters in the village—whose sister dares to demand her rightful share of inheritance, even citing verses from the Quran itself. His rage isn't just personal; it's cultural, political, and performative. He is more concerned about doing charity, involving himself in political stunts and maintaining his prestige in the village than practicing justice within his own family. Though written in the 1990s, the story painfully mirrors present-day realities where women still fight for the bare minimum, and even scriptural legitimacy is not enough to earn them their due.

At times, the stories and the plot of the book feel repetitive; again and again, women face versions of the same suffocation. Yet, repetition is the point—it builds into a collective portrait of women's lives, showing just how relentless and normalised the violence against them is. Even in



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

this overwhelming similitude, though, Mushtaq refuses to strip her characters of agency. Again and again, we witness women trying to reclaim control: some wanting to undergo sterilisation without their husbands' permission, some demand their right to inheritance, others quietly but firmly refuse to return to homes where they've endured years of mental and physical abuse. These are not grand acts of revolution, but small rebellions of survival, each one cutting into the social fabric that seeks to bind them.

The titular story, "Heart lamp", stands as a devastating example of this tension between endurance and collapse. Mehrun, the protagonist, finally decides to leave her husband's house after facing repeated abuse. But when she returns to her family, instead of support, she is met with cruelty. She is labeled a disgrace to womanhood for failing to "keep" her home, her marriage, her man. Her suffering is seen not as a wound but as a shameful mark she must carry. Forced to return to the very home she fled, something inside Mehrun breaks. The lamp of her heart—once flickering with hope, perhaps for her children, perhaps for a different life—goes out. Her act of burning herself isn't framed as a moment of weakness, but as a final response to a world that gave her no other way to be heard. That too, Mushtaq tells us, is what society can do to a woman: not just silence her, but hollow her until she no longer recognises herself.

As the collection unfolds, Mushtaq adds layers of complexity to her narrative world. While the focus remains on women's lives, some stories reveal how patriarchy entraps men as well albeit differently. In "Red Lungi", she examines how blind faith can fuel inhumanity, showing how belief systems, when unchecked, become dangerous. In "A Decision of the Heart", the protagonist Yusuf arranges the marriage of his widowed mother who is nearly 50 years old, not out of empathy, but as an act of quiet defiance against his own wife. These stories subtly highlight how even within patriarchal structures, men, too, are shaped, sometimes twisted by the systems they benefit from. Suffering is not always one-dimensional, and Mushtaq allows room for this complexity.

The collection concludes with "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord", ending on a haunting invocation: "If you were to build the world again, to create males and females again, do not be like an inexperienced potter. Come to earth as a woman, Prabhu! Be a woman once." It encapsulates the deep exhaustion and quiet rage of women who have been sidelined for generations by poverty, caste, gender, religion, and societal norms.

Building on the book's deep-rooted connection to community and resistance, the translation by Deepa Bhasthi plays a vital role in carrying its essence to a global audience. Rather than erasing the linguistic texture of the original, she preserves

its multilingual spirit—retaining Urdu and Arabic words without flattening them into English, and embracing the natural hyperbole and repetition found in everyday speech. She also resists the colonial convention of italicising non-English words, refusing to mark them as "other." This approach not only honored the linguistic richness of southern India but also carried forward the spirit of protest and resistance embodied by the author, Banu Mushtaq, a key figure in the Bandaya Sahitya movement that challenged upper-caste, male-dominated literary spaces.

Banu Mushtaq writes as someone who has lived what she tells. She is both a lawyer and an activist from the communities she portrays in her stories, stories that are shaped by what she has seen, lived through, and fought against. They do not rely on dramatic villains or heroic figures; instead, they unfold through the quiet tragedies and daily negotiations of women navigating unjust systems. That is the quiet power of *Heart Lamp*—its ability to find meaning in the mundane, to expose how normalised cruelty and silence can be, and to speak of lives that are often spoken over.

Mahmuda Emdad is a women and gender studies major with an endless interest in feminist writings, historical fiction, and pretty much everything else, all while questioning the world in the process. Reach her at mahmudaemdad123@gmail.com.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A kaleidoscopic collection of stories by an outsider

Review of 'Modhu' (Arghya Saha, Agantuk, 2023) by Taufique Mujtaba

ZERTAB QUADERI

Storytelling is not easy, especially when a few words portray a character with depth and just enough strokes to etch the social milieu for certain classes and creeds and the outcomes of political ideologies in post-independent Bangladesh. A copy of *Modhu* was handed over to me by the author, who happens to be my brother-in-law. It took me a few hours to enjoy the slim volume of less than 100 pages. I seldom read Bangla books, and I was glad it kept me hooked. It strings together a series of short accounts by Modhu to the author. While it offers glimpses into the author's social and economic class, it sits squarely on the shoulders of the central character, Modhu, who belongs to the minority Hindu community. Each story takes the reader into the lives of various relatable characters. However, the backdrop remains the same, always reminding us of the brunt of classism that minority community members have to bear in every society.

The first-person conversational style of the stories made it immediately endearing to me because it felt as if I was witnessing the unfolding of the life events of the wealthy Begum Aziz, Abrar Shahab with a past, or Khokon with his shirt—and his family—tainted by the stain of an innocent bowl of black plums.

The author and the readers are sitting very much on the same side of the table, as Modhu shares chunks and snippets of these characters. In the process, he recounts his own life story.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

Each story deals with a different set of characters, but through them all, the author reveals various sides of Modhu like peeling the layers of an onion, slowly revealing what lies at the core. His character is gradually unravelled from a slightly timid person until we see his bold, principled, intelligent, responsible, emotional, and enlightened sides. His characterisation and the plot of each storyline are juxtaposed perfectly so

that the reader doesn't lose interest in either. On the contrary, all the plots pique our interest to a crescendo and then leave the rest to our imagination and interpretation.

Besides the characters and plots being immensely relatable, Mujtaba uses Modhu to throw light on the vulnerabilities and insecurities of the less privileged class. The smatterings of wit enhance the storytelling and keep things simple

and entertaining, although there are deeper meanings to be gleaned for the astute reader. Another literary device the author has used cleverly is continuing the plot of a previous story into the next one, as well as referring to characters we met before. The reader's interest runs in parallel lines until they reach the vanishing point. Detailed descriptions of characters and their thoughts and actions uncover the deepest human psychology and also share a glimpse into the backstory of every person, with enough bait to help the reader put two and two together.

Modhu is a sensitive and sensible person. Despite being a barber by generational profession, he is educated and enlightened with strong political ideologies and a keen sense of art appreciation. The last quality comes out beautifully in the story titled "Chobi", my favourite. The power of observation and in-depth analysis emanates like a glowing lamp from Modhu, spreading a soft light all around, and reaching the murky shadows behind which hide lives and loves. This is the second last account in the series and rounds up the attitudes, self-images, and feelings of those shackled by the caste system. Modhu and his likes are always on the move, rarely getting an opportunity to settle down anywhere. Their linear trajectory is aptly titled "Ora Jabey Onek Dur" in the concluding section of the book.

Zertab Quaderi is living her dream life: reading books, dabbling in art, spending me-time, and guzzling coffee.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.

—Audre Lorde

