
When Things Speak: Memory, Objects, and Resistance in Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*

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Abstract

Banu Mushtaq's collection of short stories, *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories*, presents domestic spaces as sites of memory, resistance, and loss. The article tries to look at two select stories from this collection, "A Taste of Heaven" and "The Shroud", to decode how fiction treats material objects not only as symbols of patriarchal confinement but also as archives of lived experiences, especially that of women. Here objects function as repositories where women's histories are stored, transmitted, and even threatened. Sometimes the connection that an object establishes is so intimate and powerful that it promises a future opening to investigate the lives of women which would otherwise be erased once and for all. To account for this connection between memory and materiality, this article uses three interconnected theoretical frameworks: the concept of embodied memory, the notion of aura, and the distinctions between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. These frameworks help reading the *Heart Lamp* as a sustained meditation on the material memory which exposes the histories of women through intimate objects even when the patriarchal structures render these histories precarious. The objects associated with women in this text are both an archive and a battleground that calls in for further discussions.

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Lawyer, writer, and activist, Banu Mushtaq's (b. 1948, Hassan, Karnataka) fiction entails the life stories of women facing social inequalities and pressures of everyday domestic experiences. Mushtaq's literary formation took shape within the Bandaya Sahitya movement of 1970s–80s Karnataka, a movement against the caste and class hierarchies. Highly rooted to Karnataka's sociolinguistic landscape, Mushtaq's works are credited for their refusal to separate the personal from the political, and most of her stories are situated within an emotionally intense space which is often very realistic. Upon looking at Karnataka's sociolinguistic landscape, Kannada dominates public life, while Urdu and Arabic persist in Muslim domestic and religious spaces. This constitutes the precise social geography her fiction inhabits.

Banu Mushtaq is the author of six short story collections, a novel, an essay, and a poetry collection. She is the recipient of the Kannada Sahitya Academy award, and in 2025, she became the first Kannada-language Indian author to have received the International Booker Prize for her collection of twelve short stories titled *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories* (2025). This short story collection is mostly set in the Muslim households of Karnataka, spanning from 1990 to 2023, and it turns the domestic environment into an archive of memory, loss, and power. The homes in these stories are spaces where histories are stored in objects, gestures, and routines and are also sites of social power. These spaces are often vulnerable to erasure and damage. Ordinary objects like the mats, shoes, trees, utensils and even the household environments carry both historical and emotional weight. Mushtaq's world is embellished using objects of memory that embody habits; at the same time, they also record the existence of women in a patriarchal setup. In such spaces memory gets a fragile existence.

This article lays its primary focus on the two stories from her collection *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories*: "A Taste of Heaven" and "The Shroud". The select stories place the material objects at the centre of their emotional and narrative structure. The article tries to argue that these objects act as mnemonic archives of the lives of the women, and they preserve histories, which otherwise remain unrecorded in the public memory. The fragility associated with these memories also makes them precarious. Once the object gets destroyed, neglected, or misused, the memory that it carries does not fully disappear; instead, it returns in the form of grief, fantasy, bodily pain, or even resistance. Mushtaq exposes this unstable condition associated with the pattern of disappearance and reappearance, wherein women's histories survive, offering not only a critique of patriarchal violence but also a narrative medium that presents a mediated perspective on the material forms by which memory endures.

For reading the *Heart Lamp* as a narrative of material memory, a way in which physical objects store and transmit memory, this article uses three interconnected concepts that link memory and objects: embodied memory, aura, and nostalgia. A British social anthropologist, Paul Connerton, focused on embodied memory, and he argues that social

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

remembrance is a result of bodily habits, gestures, and repeated practices. Memory, according to him, "is sedimented, or amassed in the body" (Connerton 72) and is not only transferred through texts and institutions but also through bodily practices. In this regard, he distinguishes between two forms of memory practices: incorporating practice and inscribing practice (Connerton 72-73). Adding to the theory of embodied memory is the concept of 'Aura', developed by Walter Benjamin. A German philosopher and a cultural critic, Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), details the concept of 'aura' as the singular presence and the historical weight attached to an object in time and space (220-21). According to him,

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. (221)

Russian-American cultural theorist Svetlana Boym provides a distinction between two forms of nostalgia: restorative and reflective nostalgia, which is the third critical layer that is used to further explore the select texts. As Boym explains, "restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home", while "reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately" (xviii). While restorative nostalgia rebuilds the past as if it were a recoverable whole, reflective nostalgia dwells in fragments, loss, and incompleteness. Taken together, these three concepts help to understand that the memories explored in Mushtaq's stories are created, stored and even broken through material culture; here, the domestic objects become the archives of affection and loss.

By looking at the critical responses of *Heart Lamp*, one finds three overlapping frameworks at play: patriarchy, silence, and trauma. Some argued that the text "exposes the hidden forms of oppression and exploitation faced by women within the socio-political and cultural framework of Indian society" (Chowdhury 95). These are the domestic spaces where patriarchal powers operate. The second strand extends this notion by looking at the nature of silence and trauma in this text. Dutta's argument on silence establishes its stance as a deliberate strategy of defiance rather than submission; it provides women the agency to challenge patriarchy, religion and socio-political oppression (78). But trauma in this text is emotional and followed by a gendered silence (Bharti 444). However, not much is said about how certain objects carry the power to preserve memory, the residue of a lived experience. The objects are channels through which memory is archived and embodied habits are registered, at the same time shaping the ethical life of stories.

The story in the collection *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories*, "A Taste of Heaven", presents the psychological toll of a lifelong domestic burden that follows the erasure of identity within a patriarchal family. The story centres around the life of Bi Dadi, an eternal virgin and a child

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

widow who spent her entire life serving her brother's family. Dadi's entire existence revolves around a sacred ja-namaz (prayer mat). The mat held both her identity and her marital secrets. The conflict in the story reveals itself when her grandnephew Azeem uses the mat to clean grease off his bike. Following this, Azeem's mother Shameem Banu buys a new silk mat. While his father, Saadat, turn a blind eye to the entire incident, dismissing the domestic tension associated with it as a result of the "menopause jinn". However, the loss of the mat triggers Bi Dadi's descent into senility, needing urgent care. After the incident, Bi Dadi cried constantly; she even stopped eating. This is when children manufactured a "heavenly delusion"; they fed her Pepsi as the nectar of heaven (*aab-e-kausar*), which in turn simulated the presence of a long-lost husband. The sugar-induced madness led to the paradoxical peace that she had been searching for in a long time. This left the members of the family, including Saadat and his brother Arif, to live with guilt as they waited for her natural death.

"A Taste of Heaven" showcases how an ordinary object takes its role as a living archive of memory. For Mushtaq the mat is not just the devotional accessory; it is the material representative of years of marital memory, bodily habit, and sacred routine. Bi Dadi's attachment to the prayer mat is established carefully in the initial stages while describing her room and trunk, where "she kept the ja-namaz and the namaz chador she was given at her wedding folded on top of that trunk" and "every now and then, a few jasmine flowers would blossom within the chador's folds". This is a crucial sensory retrieval of the past where the jasmine stands not just for decoration but for the sensory trace of an intimate past: a remembered presence of a husband who used to throw jasmine flowers onto the mat. This clearly defines the status of the prayer mat as a mnemonic object; it stores memory not just as an abstract recollection of the past but as scent, touch, ritual or even repeated bodily use.

The emotional force within the story only begins with the accidental desecration of the archive. Azeem considers the prayer mat an old cloth to wipe his bike, unaware of the sentiments it holds. When Bi Dadi was offered a new luxurious mat instead of the ruined one, she cries and states, "No. I don't want this. Why does a dying woman need this?" and insists, "My ja-namaz is enough for me." This indicates the emotion tied to the mat, making it irreplaceable. Resorting to the notion of the aura as proposed by Benjamin, the mat's meaning lies in its aura; it is in fact shaped by one body, one marriage, and one history of pain (Benjamin 220-21). The new mat is incapacitated in restoring this singular relation, even if it is accompanied by holy Zamzam water.

The narrative dramatises the transference of memory through structured practice rather than conscious reflection. Bi Dadi's grief is explicitly shown when "she did not again touch the ja-namaz that was drying on the wire outside. "For several days "she did not offer namaz, though she had never before missed a prayer". This shift in ways of living can be identified using Connerton's notion of embodied habits: when the object that anchors ritual is damaged, the practice itself falters (Connerton 72-75). Bi Dadi's mat becomes her bodily form through which her prayers have become possible. When such continuity is disturbed, memory no longer remains stable.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

The disturbed memory, or the broken archive, is partially restored through fantasy. The children deceive Bi Dadi by giving her Pepsi and saying, "That is aab-e-kausar." According to Mushtaq, this scene is comic and, at the same time, devastating, and it gets a further devastating effect when Dadi asks, "If I am in heaven, then where is [my husband]?" To which it was answered that he was right behind her, throwing jasmine flowers. This is a complicated case, where memory migrates into a state of imagination. Here the entire scripted fantasy does not erase loss; instead, it reveals how memory erased materially gets transferred into the realm of imagination. Boym's notions on the restorative and reflective nostalgia can be used to analyse why Bi Dadi cannot truly recover the past. She can only use the available form of memory: the fragile, imagined reconstruction of paradise (Boym xviii). Mushtaq uses a careful stance in presenting this situation, which can otherwise turn childish and absurd. The broken archive of the prayer mat and the destroyed continuity of her marriage, bodily habit, and devotion are compensated using the idea of "heaven".

The narrative traces the movement of material loss to emotional re-creation. The prayer mat, being the site of embodied memory, is later the site of injury, which becomes the final trigger for the alternative archive built using fantasy and desire. Bi Dadi is seen repeatedly asking for "aab-e-kausar"; here the drink becomes a mnemonic substitute or a liquid counterpart for the damaged mat. She lives in "the heaven she achieved so effortlessly, free from all worry, in the company of her long-lost husband". The ending, though whimsical in nature, is in actuality the sharpest comment on the archival failure. Here the histories of women remain unpreserved materially. Memory survives only in unstable forms through longing, hallucination, and ritualised substitution.

"The Shroud" from the collection Heart Lamp is Mushtaq's another attempt at presenting how a burial cloth has the capacity to become a site of longing and moral failure. The story is centred around Shaziya, a wealthy woman, and her poor servant Yaseen Bua. Before her journey to the Hajj pilgrimage, Shaziya accepts six thousand rupees from Yaseen Bua, promising to bring back a shroud dipped in the holy Zamzam water. Her internal disdain for the crumpled money and the obsession with the Turkish carpet led Shaziya to dismiss the request, considering the shroud as a depressing and heavy burden during her return journey. Upon her return, Shaziya cruelly rebuffs Bua's humble request for the promised item. This incident affects Bua deeply; losing her self-respect, Bua leaves the place in silence. Soon Bua dies, and her son Altaz arrives to collect the shroud from Shaziya. The inability to fulfil a death wish left Shaziya even poorer and more unfortunate than Bua herself. Although her son Farman manages the burial using a local shroud, Shaziya's tears at the funeral signify not mourning for Bua but for her own conscience and spiritual standing.

Mushtaq's story begins with the absence of the promised shroud, the material object that runs the entire narrative memory. Farman says, "what has happened has happened ... i will get everything to your house once ammi wakes up." This seemingly practical delay becomes ethically charged because the kafan (shroud) is not an ordinary object but the last material form that is capable of taking Yaseen Bua to God and securing a place in Heaven.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

The object is given a divine stature when Shaziya remembers Yaseen Bua pleading, "My avva [mother], there is six thousand rupees here. You are anyway going to Hajj. Please bring me a kafan from there after dipping it in the holy Zamzam water." The shroud is thus revealed to be a sacred archive of the anticipated death and not just a burial cloth. 'Shroud' is here equated to the entire history of Bua's labour, deprivation, and deferred dignity, let alone its religious significance.

The symbolic significance of kafan is greater compared to its material nature. The entire life of Yaseem Bua is shaped by a sense of precarity; she "washed vessels in the front yards of several houses, sweeping and cleaning, a loner amidst weddings, festivals, ceremonies, and birthdays" and saved every single paisa not from greed but from anxiety about an insecure future. Her wish for the Zamzam-soaked shroud goes beyond the reach of her life defined by precarity; however, it is her final claim for a spiritual worth. Resorting to the concept of 'aura', proposed by Walter Benjamin, the value of the shroud is inseparable from its singularity: the zamzam water absorbed into its fabric, the sanctity of Mecca that it evokes, and Bua's lifelong vision of her own death establish that no other shroud could serve as its substitute (Benjamin 220-21). Here the meaning of the object is derived from its irreplaceability. To replace the ordinary is to miss the entire point of what Bua has been asking for.

From the very beginning itself, Mushtaq thoughtfully establishes the character of Shaziya as a person belonging to the upper class. When she receives the money from Bua, she feels that the notes are "broken, shattered, crumpled, wrinkly, diminished in essence and form". Here Mushtaq is not only describing money but also the material vulnerability of the poor and the social shame attached to their labour. Shaziya's immediate reflex after receiving the money was to wash her hands; here, poverty itself is portrayed as a sign of contamination. However, as the narrative moves forward, this gesture turns back on her, as she was the morally contaminated one for not keeping her promise. Shaziya never recovers from the past; instead, she is forced to live with the fragment of a broken promise and the guilt it carries. This is the notion of reflective nostalgia as identified by Boym. Shaziya's act is not a result of simple negligence but the sign of how daily life and consumer distraction interrupt ethical memory.

The story also highlights how spiritual intentions can be displaced by material desires even during a pilgrimage. Mecca is a place where people go for pilgrimage, and Shaziya forgets the "depressing and heavy objects" like a shroud, but her mind did not fail to notice carpets and many other objects of her interest. It is important to note that Mushtaq is not trying to moralise simplicity in this narrative; instead, her intention is to represent the unstable nature of human memory under pressure. When Shaziya says, "What kafan, which kafan after falling down dead? Someone or other will put you in a kafan." Her words reveal the violence of delay, not just casual rudeness. It is with Bua's death that her failure in action comes to surface. She insists, "I still have the ja-namaz that your mother-in-law gave me ... I offer namaz on it when I get time. Where will I keep such a new and beautiful ja-namaz? How

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

much longer do I have to live? How many more namaz will I offer?" Here the answer is devastating, as it is a direct exposure to the difference between emotional symbolism and the actual human need. What Bua wants is not any object but the one she specifically requested before death.

The ending exposes the tragedy carried in a missed promise. When Farman explains that he "bought a kafan, incense sticks, perfume and other things needed for the rituals, then had the grave dug" and wants to take his mother back to the burial, Shaziya tears up. The tears represent the measure of her belated understanding: "It was not Yaseen Bua's last rites being conducted, but her own." This reverses the direction of mourning. Bua's rituals turn into Shaziya's moral burial, a funeral for her own self-image. The shroud thus becomes a mnemonic object in two ways: it carries Bua's final hope, and it acts as the material representative of how Shaziya confronts her own inability to remember a promise. The story shows how memory gets preserved in materials. The shroud, though not materially present in the story, becomes the most important presence as it exposes the cost of a promise deferred too long.

In close reading the two select stories from the Banu Mushtaq's collection *The Heart Lamp*, "A Taste of Heaven" and "The Shroud", it is evident to note the different yet related fates of mnemonic objects. When "A Taste of Heaven" depicts preservation turned to loss, "The Shroud" shows a promise turned to delay and then a regretting conscience. The prayer mat is an intimate archive of marital memory, bodily habit and, at the same time, devotion. The destruction of the mat can be associated only with the imagined fantasy and substituted sweetness. The kafan, however, is a sacred object, a deferred archive, and its only purpose was to provide an honourable death for Yaseen Bua, whose entire life depended on the idea of getting a burial as she imagined all her life. The story exposes the cost of forgetting and the limits of wealth by looking deeper into the inner world of Shaziya. In the two stories discussed, objects did not carry a neutral existence; instead, they are the active force that drives the narrative forward. These materials are either lost or stolen from the lives of those whose entire existence depends on them. Thus, they return in the form of resistance, grief or even guilt. The thread that ties the two narratives closely is its insistence on how some material objects are but the most important aspects of women's lives: a fragile material form that can neither be replaced fully nor be ignored safely. As explained by Mushtaq, the lives of women are not recorded officially but in things touched, felt, worn, hidden, lost, and fought over. Objects turn into archives, yet remain vulnerable to accident and neglect. Vulnerability lends moral standing to these narratives; it is the moral force that must be guarded, mourned, and at times defended. This also makes Mushtaq's writings not just works of suffering but more of the stubborn persistence of women's inner lives often kept away from public eyes.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

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