



Rebel With a Pen

An exclusive interview with the ever-defiant Banu Mushtaq, who made history as the first Kannada-language author to win the prestigious International Booker Prize

I HAVE NOT BOWED BEFORE anybody in my whole life. That is my character.”

Now 77, Indian writer Banu Mushtaq has always stood for equality and rallied against injustice. She’s taken to the streets in protest, battled in court and written stories filled with wit and quiet fury. This is a landmark year for her, as she became the first Kannada-language and first short-story writer to win the prestigious International Booker Prize for her collection *Heart Lamp*. It is rare work—a book that shines light on the precarious lives of Muslim women in India’s smaller towns and cities.

Mushtaq says she inherited her defiance from her father, Sheikh Abdul Rahman, who enrolled her in a Kannada-language school when she was 8 years old. “At that time, Muslim girls were allowed to study

in Urdu schools and boys in Kannada,” she told *Ms.* “Our extended family started questioning him, ‘How come you are putting a girl into a Kannada school? She has to study Islamic religious texts and be submissive.’”

In the 1950s, Rahman’s choice was a radical one, and it changed the course of all five of his younger daughters’ lives. For Mushtaq, it provided the language that would later allow her to enter public and activist spaces.

Seeing her father—a senior government employee—educate his brothers and marry off a sister, and watching both of her parents take care of a whole clan while still keeping their doors open to any needy, sick or old person taught her valuable lessons in humanity. When she was in her 20s and the women around her were getting married, Mushtaq joined the protests led by the literary circles in her hometown, Hassan. In Karnataka state in the 1970s, there were several movements devoted to the Dalits (formerly known as “untouchables,” the lowest Hindu caste), farmers and women. Within these movements, Mushtaq immediately found belonging and soon became their state-level organizer.

She joined the Bandaya Sahitya [the progressive literary movement] in 1974. “Our slogan was ‘Khadgavagali kavya!’—translated as ‘Let poems be your sword.’ A sword should not cut people. A sword should become a poem and unite people,” she says.

At 26, she married a distant relative, Mohiyuddin Mushtaq, for love. Shortly after becoming a daughter-in-law, she was asked to resign from work and relinquish her independence. Confined to her in-laws’ home, wearing a burqa, Mushtaq’s will to fight, emotionally and intellectually,

KATE GREEN/GETTY IMAGES



From far left: Banu Mushtaq won the International Booker Prize in May; Mushtaq (second from left) with (from left) her father, Sheikh Abdul Rahman; her sister Gowhar Banu Azam; and her mother, Akhtara Banu; Mushtaq received a bachelor's degree from the University of Mysore in 1970.

Muslim male authors didn't [write about] their own roots or perspectives. My protagonists were Muslim women, and I began using Muslim names. ... The issues were the same everywhere: women being harassed, censored, tortured, made into the slaves of men."

She published her first short story collection in 1990. Her second, *Benki Mala (Fire Rain)* in 1999, included a story that was later adapted by acclaimed filmmaker Girish Kasaravalli. As her writing gained recognition, however, it also drew backlash. When she spoke out in favor of women being allowed to pray in mosques, a fatwa was issued against her, and she was subjected to a complete social boycott by her community in 2000.

Despite being a practicing district lawyer, Mushtaq says she felt defenseless. Then, a knife-wielding attacker broke into her office. He was overpowered by her husband and taken into police custody, but Mushtaq's daughter asked her to show mercy and drop the charges. Mushtaq, though traumatized, agreed.

Still, she persists in her defiance: She went to jail for protesting when right-wing groups tried to claim a worship site shared between Hindus and Muslims, the Bababudan Dargah, as solely a Hindu temple. Her pen continues to bleed for the plight of Muslims and the plight of women.

Upon accepting her Booker Prize, Mushtaq contended, "In a world that often tries to divide us, literature remains one of the last sacred spaces where we can live inside each others' minds, if only for a few pages."

—KANIKA SHARMA

drained away. She recalls that only her husband's love saved her.

Fleeing to her father's house penniless with her then-jobless husband, she was rescued by her family, who chipped in with money for household expenses and childcare help for her 1-year-old daughter. Soon, her family grew with another daughter, and then another, but Mushtaq suffered from depression. Her father, worried, secretly entered her in the local municipal election. She ended up serving two terms.

"In 1981, one or two months after my third daughter was born, my husband brought me a magazine of investigative journalism," Mushtaq says. "Immediately, I liked it. ... It has the power to change the power politics of our state." She had been following a news story that disturbed her deeply. A teacher was targeted for abuse because she watched a film at the cinema. Mushtaq recalls that in those days, women were severely punished by the

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jamaat [a religious council] for overstepping their limited roles as wives and mothers and for escaping the domestic sphere.

"[One] teacher was harassed and the water supply to her home was cut off," Mushtaq says. "When this news was published, I got enraged. I said, 'Why should women not get entertainment?' I was angry and my baby was lying in my lap. I took paper and [a] pen and wrote, questioning where in religion is this supported, quoting the Hadiths [Islamic sacred texts] from memory." The editor not only published Mushtaq's fierce opinion, but continued to assign her stories to report for the next decade.

Committed to creating social change, Mushtaq enrolled in law school. But she also longed for the world of literature. "At that time, Kannada literature was dominated by Hindu male writers," she says. "Even the few