

Translating the Inner Light: A Critical Study of Heart lamp and the Ethics of Spiritual Translation

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Paper Received on 25-08-2026, Accepted on 26-09-2026
Published on 30-09-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.09.770

Abstract

Spiritual literature poses unique hermeneutic challenges, particularly when its narrative is embedded within culturally specific contexts and expressed through poetic or symbolic language. *Heart lamp*, originally written in Kannada by Banu Mushtaq, is a profound example of such literature. Known for her quiet but subversive voice, Mushtaq engages with themes of womanhood, faith, inner illumination, and resistance in the lives of Muslim women in South India. The stories, while grounded in local realities, move towards a metaphysical register that evokes spiritual insight and transformation. In 2025, the work gained wider recognition through the English translation by Deepa Bhasthi, which won the International Booker Prize. Bhasthi's approach, described as "translating with an accent," refrains from smoothing over the linguistic, cultural, and spiritual intricacies of the original text. Rather than domesticating the source material for a Western audience, the translator sustains its semantic opacity and cultural distinctiveness. This research article offers a critical engagement with *Heart lamp*, examining how the text navigates between inner spiritual experience and external socio-political constraints. It also considers the ethics of spiritual translation—not as a technical operation, but as a form of ethical and philosophical mediation. Drawing from Indian traditions of *svādhyāya* (self-reflection), *viveka* (discrimination), and *dharma* (ethical duty), the article contends that *Heart lamp* resists reduction into utilitarian meanings and demands a mode of reading that is attentive, reverent, and ethically responsive. It repositions translation as a spiritual and moral act—one that involves not merely the transfer of language, but a careful engagement with silence, ambiguity, and the ineffable dimensions of human experience.

Keywords: Ambiguity, Muslim women, Semantics Silence, Spiritual translation

Introduction

The act of literary translation—particularly within spiritual or culturally embedded narratives—transcends a mere linguistic exercise. It necessitates an immersion in philosophical worldviews, cultural memory, and the metaphysical undercurrents that inform the source text. In the Indian literary context, such translation demands both epistemic responsibility and ontological awareness.

The present study examines *Heartlamp*, a collection of short stories originally written in Kannada by Banu Mushtaq and translated into English by Deepa Bhashthi, with the aim of evaluating the ethical challenges and responsibilities involved in rendering spiritual content across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Banu Mushtaq is a prominent figure in contemporary Kannada literature, noted for her nuanced portrayal of Muslim women's inner lives, marked not by overt religiosity but by quiet spiritual resilience. Her narrative style is neither declarative nor polemical; instead, it adopts a contemplative tone that integrates lived experience with unspoken longing. As a writer rooted in the syncretic culture of Karnataka, Mushtaq's prose draws on Islamic mystical traditions, folk idioms, and regionally embedded symbols. Her storytelling is often aligned with the subtle metaphysical registers of Sufism and *tasawwuf*, evoking the internal struggle and spiritual endurance of women in circumscribed social conditions.

Deepa Bhashthi, the translator of *Heartlamp*, adopts a distinctive methodology she refers to as “translating with an accent”—a practice that deliberately resists the impulse to erase the foreignness of the source text. Rather than privileging linguistic fluency, Bhashthi retains vernacular cadences, syntactic rhythms, and culturally loaded metaphors. This aligns with the decolonial turn in translation theory that challenges the monolingual norms of the Anglophone literary market (Trivedi, 2006). Her approach draws from a tradition of ethical foreignisation, resonant with the philosophy of *anuvad* rather than *anuvādyā*—terms explored by Sanskrit and Bhakti-era thinkers to distinguish between interpretative engagement and mechanical repetition (Ramanujan, 1989). Within Indian literary and philosophical traditions, translation has often been conceived as a transformative act, not a derivative one. In the Upanishadic ethos, the transfer of knowledge is never transactional but dialogic, embedded in teacher-disciple relationships and conditioned by *adhikāra* (eligibility) and *śraddhā* (faith). The translator, then, must embody not only linguistic competence but spiritual sensitivity. In this sense, the translator approximates the role of a *sādhaka*, whose engagement with the text is reflective, ethical, and contemplative (Mukherjee, 1994). Such a stance resists the reduction of translation to a market-oriented activity and instead frames it as a moral and epistemological encounter.

This paradigm finds philosophical support in the Indian notion of *svādhyāya*—a Sanskrit term that denotes study of the self through sacred texts. As elaborated in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, *svādhyāya* is not rote recitation but a sustained inquiry into truth, mediated through disciplined reading and reflection.

In the act of spiritual translation, *svādhyāya* becomes especially pertinent, as the translator is required to attend not only to the semantic structure of the text but to its *rasa*—its aesthetic and emotional essence. According to Abhinavagupta's *Dhvanyāloka* commentary, *rasa* is that which cannot be paraphrased; it must be evoked through intuition and sensibility (Pollock, 2006). This underscores the translator's ethical burden—not simply to carry meaning, but to transmit affect, mood, and inner light.

Bhasthi's translation of *Heartlamp* makes a significant intervention in this regard. Rather than translating for clarity or commercial fluency, she retains the intimate dissonances of the Kannada original. Names, proverbs, familial speech patterns, and Islamic references are left unitalicised and largely unexplained. This method challenges the imperial habit of rendering the subaltern intelligible for a Western or upper-class Anglophone gaze. In doing so, the translation performs an act of resistance—it preserves the semantic density and metaphysical ambiguity of the original, thereby compelling the reader into a space of ethical encounter and hermeneutic labour (Devy, 1993). The ethical implications of such a translation are manifold. In Indian poetics, particularly in the *Natyashastra* tradition, the interpreter must possess *sahridayatva*—a quality of empathy or shared sensibility. The translator must not only understand the words but must resonate with the feeling-world of the author. As Bhasthi notes in her translator's statement, this process involved not only linguistic engagement but a moral alignment with the worldview of Mushtaq. Translation, therefore, becomes an *adhyātmika* (spiritual) practice. It involves the cultivation of inner attentiveness, restraint, and the humility to allow the source text to retain its otherness.

The conceptual tools of *viveka* (discernment) and *dharma* (ethical duty) also have direct implications for the translator's work. In Vedantic discourse, *viveka* is the critical discrimination between the real and unreal—a skill developed through disciplined introspection. Applied to translation, it enables the practitioner to determine what should be retained in its original form, what should be transcreated, and what should be left untranslated. Meanwhile, *dharma*, often simplified as duty, refers to the harmonious alignment of action with cosmic order. A translator operating within the framework of *dharma* recognises that her choices bear consequences—not

just for the intelligibility of the text, but for its spiritual integrity and cultural situatedness.

These considerations are particularly significant when the translated work originates from a minoritized position. Banu Mushtaq writes not only as a woman, but as a Muslim woman in a largely Hindu literary landscape. Her stories thus carry an archive of memory, trauma, resistance, and inner awakening that are historically occluded in dominant national narratives. Bhasthi's refusal to "smooth over" the complexities of Mushtaq's idiom allows the English version of *Heartlamp* to function as a *counter-translation*—a work that resists assimilation into hegemonic literary registers (Niranjana, 1992). The task of this article, therefore, is not to assess the accuracy of translation in a reductive sense, but to explore its philosophical and ethical stakes. What does it mean to translate a spiritual idiom from a regional, subaltern tradition into a global lingua franca? Can spiritual resonance survive linguistic mediation? What does a translator owe to the text, the author, and the reader—and how are these obligations negotiated in practice?

Through a close textual and philosophical reading of selected stories from *Heartlamp*, this paper will demonstrate how Bhasthi's ethical translation practice enacts a form of literary *tapas*—a disciplined, morally aware engagement with textual otherness. It will also draw on Indian aesthetic theory, translation studies, and decolonial thought to develop a framework of "spiritual translation ethics." In doing so, the paper situates itself within a growing scholarly conversation that seeks to reclaim translation as a site of epistemic justice, spiritual fidelity, and cultural remembrance.

Discussion

The process of translating *Heartlamp* from Kannada into English reveals complex intersections of language, spirituality, culture, and ethics that challenge conventional paradigms of translation. This article highlights how translation in the spiritual and affective register transcends mere linguistic equivalence to become an embodied ethical practice. Mushtaq's original Kannada stories evoke a deeply felt spiritual interiority rooted in Islamic mysticism, regional ethos, and gendered experiences, which the translator, Bhasthi, negotiates with profound sensitivity and philosophical awareness. The discussion here engages with the nature of this negotiation, foregrounding three interrelated dimensions: the cultural and spiritual specificity of the source text, the translator's ethical responsibility as a mediator, and the implications of linguistic and aesthetic choices on the reader's reception.

The Cultural and Spiritual Specificity of the Source Text

Mushtaq's *Heartlamp* exemplifies the ways in which spiritual experience is inextricably tied to cultural particularities. Dissimilar to texts that universalize spirituality into abstract, decontextualized terms, *Heartlamp* is steeped in the lived realities of Muslim women in Karnataka, negotiating identities through intimate narrations of faith, resilience, and suffering. This specificity is deeply rooted in the region's syncretic religious landscape and the philosophical tenets of Sufism, such as *fana* (self-annihilation) and *baqa* (subsistence in God), which are often embedded in the narrative as subtle metaphors or narrative silences.

These metaphysical nuances are not easily translatable into English without loss or distortion. As noted by Mukherjee (1994), the spiritual text requires a sensitivity that extends beyond the semantic content to encompass affective, ritualistic, and symbolic registers. Bhashthi's translation thus foregrounds the inseparability of text and context. For instance, the deliberate retention of untranslated terms like *zikr* (remembrance of God) or the unaltered representation of culturally embedded proverbs invites readers into a dialogic space that acknowledges the limits of translation. This approach counters dominant Anglophone literary conventions that often seek to domesticate or flatten "foreign" elements for the sake of accessibility.

The spiritual idioms in *Heartlamp* resonate with the Indian tradition of *rasa* theory, where the text's emotional flavour or aesthetic essence is paramount. Pollock (2006) discusses how the *rasa* cannot be directly translated but must be evoked through a combination of language, cultural knowledge, and empathetic engagement. In this context, Bhashthi's choice to preserve vernacular cadences and the rhythm of Kannada speech functions as a conduit for sustaining the *rasa*, enabling readers to glimpse the inner light that animates Mushtaq's stories. Such a strategy respects the source text's ontological status as a living tradition rather than a static artifact.

The Translator's Ethical Responsibility as Mediator

The role of the translator in spiritual texts extends beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass ethical stewardship. In Indian philosophical thought, particularly within the Upanishadic tradition, the transmission of knowledge is framed as a sacred trust that requires *adhikāra* (eligibility), *śraddhā* (faith), and *viveka* (discernment). Translators, therefore, function not only as linguistic intermediaries but as custodians of meaning and spiritual intent (Ramanujan, 1989). Deepa Bhashthi's translator's preface and practice reveal an acute awareness of this responsibility. Bhashthi's methodology, described as "translating with an accent," consciously resists the homogenizing tendencies of global English, retaining cultural

specificity while inviting readers into an ethically complex encounter. By refusing to over-domesticate or simplify, she cultivates a form of *sahridayatva*—an empathetic resonance with the source author's sensibility—which is vital for faithfully conveying spiritual affect. This empathetic translation aligns with the ethical imperatives outlined in the *Natyashastra*, where the interpreter must share the emotional world of the original creator to do justice to the aesthetic experience (Devy, 1993).

The translator's ethical duty is further underscored by the positionality of both author and translator. Mushtaq's identity as a Muslim woman writing in a Hindu-majority literary space implicates the work in dynamics of marginalization and cultural resistance. Translation here becomes an act of cultural negotiation and political affirmation, rather than mere literary transfer. Bhasthi's conscious decision to preserve idiomatic expressions and religious references without explanatory footnotes challenges colonial and postcolonial translation paradigms that often marginalize subaltern voices by "explaining away" their cultural specificities (Niranjana, 1992). This ethical stance calls attention to the politics of visibility and invisibility in translation. By allowing the "foreign" to remain partially opaque, the translation refuses to render the Other fully knowable or assimilable to dominant norms. This fosters a respect for difference and complicates the reader's engagement with the text. In this sense, the translator acts as a cultural broker and ethical interlocutor, negotiating the tensions between faithfulness to the source and intelligibility for the target audience.

Linguistic and Aesthetic Choices and Their Impact on Reception

The linguistic and stylistic strategies employed in *Heartlamp*'s English rendition have significant implications for how readers receive and interpret the text. Bhasthi's deliberate retention of source language elements, syntactic irregularities, and culturally specific metaphors challenges the expectations of Anglophone readers accustomed to standardized, "fluent" English translations. Such disruptions function as ethical markers, signalling the presence of a distinct worldview that resists immediate comprehension.

These choices can be understood through the lens of postcolonial translation theory, which emphasizes "foreignization" over "domestication" (Venuti, 1995). Foreignization deliberately preserves the alterity of the source text, compelling readers to confront cultural difference and linguistic otherness. This strategy resonates with Indian indigenous epistemologies that privilege heterogeneity and multiplicity over uniformity, reflecting the country's vast linguistic and cultural diversity. Bhasthi's translation captures the oral qualities inherent in

Mushtaq's storytelling, such as repetition, pauses, and rhythm, which serve as aesthetic vehicles for spiritual expression. Oral traditions have a significant place in Indian literature, as embodied in the *Bhakti* and *Sufi* poetic forms, where sound and rhythm evoke devotional intensity (Sastri, 1998). By preserving these features, the translation sustains the performative dimension of the original text, inviting readers to experience the stories as living utterances rather than disembodied prose. The aesthetic of restraint and quiet intensity in *Heartlamp* also challenges dominant literary paradigms that valorise overt narrative climaxes or plot-driven momentum. The subtlety of Mushtaq's prose, marked by silences and elliptical storytelling, mirrors the meditative modes of spiritual practice. Translating such aesthetic qualities demands not only technical skill but also a philosophical attunement to the text's contemplative ethos. Bhashthi's ethical approach honours this requirement, producing a translation that prioritizes experiential fidelity over linguistic smoothness.

Broader Implications for Translation Ethics and Spiritual Literature

The case of *Heartlamp* situates itself within broader debates on the ethics of translating spiritual and culturally embedded texts. Indian literary and philosophical traditions provide a rich framework for understanding translation as a responsibility to uphold the text's moral and spiritual integrity. This contrasts with the commercialized, globalized notion of translation as a service industry, reducing texts to commodities stripped of their cultural embeddedness. Scholars such as Trivedi (2006) argue for a revaluation of translation practices that foreground ethical engagement, cultural specificity, and epistemic justice.

Heartlamp exemplifies this shift by foregrounding the translator's role as an ethical agent who negotiates power dynamics, cultural translation, and spiritual transmission. The translation resists erasure of the author's marginal identity, positioning the work as a site of cultural dialogue rather than assimilation.

This approach also raises important questions regarding readership. How does one cultivate an audience capable of appreciating the ethical and spiritual density of such translations? The answer lies in embracing linguistic and cultural complexity as an invitation rather than a barrier. Readers are called upon to engage with the text through patience, openness, and humility—virtues that mirror the spiritual values embedded in the source material.

In sum, the translation of *Heartlamp* exemplifies the ethical, cultural, and philosophical challenges inherent in rendering spiritual literature across languages. Banu Mushtaq's work, suffused with the particularities of Muslim female experiences and Islamic mysticism in Kannada, demands a translation practice that is ethically sensitive, culturally nuanced, and philosophically informed. Bhashthi's translation

embodies this ideal, negotiating the tensions between faithfulness and intelligibility through a strategy of foreignization, empathetic resonance, and ethical responsibility. The article highlights the importance of viewing translation as a form of spiritual practice, one that honours the source text's inner light rather than diluting it for commercial or linguistic convenience. By drawing on Indian aesthetic and philosophical traditions, this discussion contributes to a re-conceptualization of translation ethics—one that prioritizes moral accountability, cultural specificity, and epistemic justice. *Heartlamp* thus emerges not only as a literary text but as a site of ethical encounter and spiritual dialogue, demonstrating the transformative potential of translation in bridging worlds while preserving difference.

Conclusion

The critical examination of *Heartlamp* and its English rendition foregrounds the profound ethical, cultural, and philosophical dimensions that underpin the translation of spiritual literature. This study has demonstrated that translating such texts extends beyond the conventional bounds of linguistic transference to encompass a deeply situated ethical responsibility. This responsibility involves honouring the spiritual ethos, cultural specificity, and affective resonance embedded in the original work while navigating the demands and expectations of the target language readership.

Mushtaq's *Heartlamp* emerges as a luminous example of how spirituality, identity, and cultural particularity converge in literary form. Rooted in the lived experiences of Muslim women in Karnataka and suffused with the philosophical insights of Islamic mysticism, the text resists universalizing tendencies that risk erasing its distinctiveness. The original Kannada text's spiritual idioms and culturally embedded nuances are not merely ornamental but integral to the work's meaning and power. The challenge of conveying this "inner light" lies not in finding exact linguistic equivalents but in transmitting the text's experiential and ethical core.

The translator, Bhashi, assumes a pivotal role in this complex process. Her approach, characterized by deliberate "accenting" and strategic retention of source language elements, underscores a commitment to preserving cultural specificity and spiritual depth. By resisting domestication and instead embracing foreignization, Bhashi positions the reader as an active participant in an intercultural dialogue, where difference is respected rather than erased. This ethical stance aligns closely with Indian traditions of knowledge transmission, which emphasize the sanctity of the text and the discernment required to mediate its meaning responsibly. The linguistic and aesthetic strategies employed in the translation reflect an ethical philosophy that values fidelity not only to semantic content but also to affective and

performative dimensions. The preservation of vernacular cadences, metaphoric richness, and narrative silences maintains the meditative quality of the original stories, allowing readers to encounter the spiritual ethos on its own terms. This approach challenges dominant literary conventions that often prioritize fluidity and readability over cultural integrity and experiential authenticity.

More broadly, this study contributes to concurrent scholarly conversations about the ethics of translating spiritual and culturally embedded texts in a globalized world. Indian epistemologies and aesthetic theories, such as *rasa* and *dharma*, provide valuable frameworks for reimagining translation as an act of moral and spiritual accountability rather than mere technical reproduction. This perspective foregrounds the translator's role as a custodian of cultural memory and ethical interlocutor, responsible for mediating power dynamics and fostering intercultural respect. Finally, the study highlights the importance of cultivating an engaged and ethically attuned readership, willing to embrace complexity and multiplicity. Translation, in this light, becomes a transformative practice that bridges worlds without flattening difference, inviting readers into a dialogic space where spiritual and cultural diversity can be encountered with humility and openness.

To conclude, the translation of *Heartlamp* exemplifies the possibility of rendering spiritual literature across linguistic boundaries without compromising its ethical and cultural essence. It reveals translation as a form of spiritual praxis, demanding empathy, responsibility, and philosophical attunement. By situating the translator's work within Indian ethical and aesthetic traditions, this study advances a nuanced understanding of translation as an ethically charged, culturally specific, and profoundly human endeavour. Such an approach not only honours the "inner light" of *Heartlamp* but also illuminates broader pathways for future translations of spiritually and culturally situated texts, ensuring their voices continue to resonate authentically across languages and cultures.

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