

Partition, Patriarchy and Symbolic Violence: Refugee Crisis and Intersectional Vulnerabilities in Samaresh Basu's "The Woman Who Sold Wares"

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Abstract

The paper offers a critical reading of Samaresh Basu's short story "The Woman Who Sold Wares", focusing on the lived realities of Pushpabala, an eighteen-year-old refugee woman struggling to sustain her family in post-Partition Calcutta. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks such as Kimberlé Crenshaw's idea of "intersectionality" and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence", the paper explores how her experiences are shaped by the intersection of gender, displacement and economic vulnerability, which together intensify her suffering and marginalisation within patriarchal spaces. The first section of the paper examines her entry into the male-dominated informal economy, where she is met with suspicion, exclusion and everyday humiliation. The second section explores the subtle yet pervasive forms of symbolic violence that govern her everyday existence, revealing how power operates through norms and attitudes rather than overt force. The paper also traces Pushpabala's fragile yet enduring resilience as she struggles to sustain her family in the unknown land.

Keywords: Partition, Woman, Patriarchy, Intersectional Precarities, Symbolic Violence, Resilience

Introduction

Unlike the sudden, catastrophic, and violent Partition of Punjab, the Partition of Bengal unfolded as a slower, more diffused, and prolonged process. The fragile and fluid nature of the border, combined with the continuous movement of migrants, refugees, and infiltrators, has rendered the Bengal frontier persistently unsettled and “bleeding.” Caught in the vortex of this mayhem, women suffered the most due to their gendered identity, which placed them in a far more precarious position than male refugees. Various forms of gendered violence, including rape, abduction, forced conversion, and forced marriage, were inflicted on women during and after this troubled period. In the post-Partition period, women refugees had to face several adversities to survive in an alien land. As Paulomi Chakraborty has pointed out, “The figure of the refugee woman is a doubly marginalized figure, as both a refugee and a woman” (20). For women, who had thus far been confined within the domestic sphere, the biggest challenge was entering the male-dominated public sphere to earn their livelihood and survive. Homelessness, social alienation, lack of security, financial instability, and humiliation were constant threats to their survival in the unknown land. For women, who are considered the embodiment of the cultural values of the community, uprooting, displacement, and the loss of *desh* carried different implications than they did for male refugees. However, one positive aspect of the refugee woman’s experience in the East, as Bagchi and Dasgupta have pointed out, is “the historic assertion of the refugee-woman as the tireless breadwinner,” which changed “the digits of feminine aspiration and altered the social landscape irrevocably” (6).

A significant number of Bengal Partition narratives delve into the multi-layered sufferings experienced by refugee women on both sides of the porous border. In this regard, Samaresh Basu’s short story “The Woman Who Sold Wares”, translated from the Bengali short story “Pasharini” into English by Sudeshna Chakravarti, offers a powerful and poignant reading. The story focuses on Pushpabala, an eighteen-year-old refugee woman from Vajrahat in the Dhaka district who migrated to Calcutta with her mother and younger siblings. It portrays Pushpabala’s relentless struggle for survival in an unfamiliar land, particularly as a hawker in a male-dominated world, as she seeks to earn a livelihood for her family. No significant critical work has yet been done on this story. This paper offers a critical reading of Basu’s narrative to examine how Pushpabala’s refugee and gendered identities intersect to intensify her marginalisation and economic exclusion within patriarchal spaces. It also highlights her quiet yet fragile resilience in the face of these challenges. The

paper is divided into two sections. The first section, titled “Gender Politics, Intersecting Precarities and Economic Exclusion”, examines how Pushpabala is viewed with suspicion, denied economic opportunities, and subjected to ridicule and humiliation within patriarchal power structures that normalize male authority and restrict women’s agency. The second section, titled “Non-physical Violence, Existential Struggle and Resilience”, explores how Pushpabala’s everyday life is shaped by subtle forms of symbolic violence embedded in social norms, attitudes, and expectations. It also highlights her resilience as she strives to survive and sustain her family through continuous negotiation with these invisible yet powerful forces.

Gender Politics, Intersecting Precarities and Economic Exclusion

The story unfolds in a landscape marked by stillness and suspension. This stillness mirrors the emotional and temporal stasis of refugee life in the aftermath of the Partition of Bengal. However, it is not merely external but is deeply inscribed upon the subject herself, as reflected in Pushpabala’s appearance. As Basu writes, “Her name was Pushpa—Pushpabala. Pushpa’s eyes were large but sad. Just by looking at her, it could be sensed that she had passed through many a stormy night and, having recovered a little, had arrived at a happy morning” (30). Pushpabala’s “sad” eyes bear the imprint of a past shaped by loss, struggle and displacement. At the same time, the idea of a “happy morning” hints at a faint, uncertain hope for renewal. The description that “she stood there with both hope and suspense” (Basu 30) foregrounds Pushpabala’s inner conflict. On one hand, her hope suggests a quiet desire to survive, rebuild and move forward despite hardship. On the other hand, her suspense reflects lingering uncertainty—a sense of not knowing what lies ahead. This tension between hope and fear is not solely personal but is shaped by the conditions that circumscribe her existence. Living within a patriarchal social structure, her agency and autonomy are restricted, and her opportunities remain limited. Moreover, her refugee identity intersects with these constraints, which further intensifies her vulnerability. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of “intersectionality”¹ offers a critical framework for understanding Pushpabala’s gendered precarity in an unfamiliar land. “Intersectionality” examines how “major axes of social division—such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and age—do not operate in isolation but intersect to produce complex and interdependent forms of inequality” (Collins and Bilge 4). For Pushpabala, vulnerability emerges through the convergence of gender, class, age and refugee status. Each reinforces the others rather than operating as discrete categories. Her

position as a young, economically insecure refugee woman places her at a critical intersection where multiple forms of marginalisation converge. From an intersectional perspective, her economic insecurity cannot be understood in isolation, as it is closely tied to gendered barriers that restrict access to stable opportunities. Her refugee status further deepens this condition. It renders her socially invisible and without reliable institutional support. At the same time, her youth and unmarried status make her particularly vulnerable. It subjects her to constant scrutiny within a social world that measures a woman's respectability through domesticity and male protection. These aspects of her identity intersect to shape how she experiences marginalisation in everyday life. They make her sufferings more intense and complex than any single form of disadvantage on its own.

In the story, the presence of patriarchy is most evident in the ways it regulates and constrains Pushpabala's movement within the public sphere. Her position as a hawker places her in a male-dominated domain, and this perceived transgression invites suspicion, hostility and unrelenting scrutiny. Such responses underscore a social system that seeks to discipline women's mobility and economic agency. Within this patriarchal framework, her hesitation and silence acquire deeper significance. They emerge as socially conditioned responses to a system that disciplines and marginalises women who step beyond prescribed gender norms. Patriarchy thus operates as a pervasive and normalising force in the narrative, one that not only circumscribes Pushpabala's agency but also renders her struggles invisible. It legitimises her suffering while withholding recognition and support. The narrative's emphasis on her observational stance—watching the hawkers “from the corner of her eye” (Basu 30)—underscores her marginal position within a male-dominated economic sphere. The station, as depicted in the story, is structured by patriarchal norms that construct economic agency as inherently masculine. Pushpa's inability to step into this space reflects the gendered barriers that regulate access to livelihood. She is positioned at the edges of an economy that does not recognise her as a legitimate participant. The male hawkers' narratives of suffering—stories of injury, displacement and hardship—serve to construct a shared masculine identity that transforms vulnerability into collective strength. Statements such as “I got shot and lost my leg...Finally I became a hawker...” (Basu 33) function as markers of endurance and resilience that grant acceptance and legitimacy in a male-dominated economic sphere. However, this collective is shaped by underlying patriarchal norms. While men are able to turn their suffering into a source of recognition and belonging, Pushpa remains excluded from

this network despite going through similar hardships. Her exclusion shows how patriarchy continues to shape even marginalised spaces, where men's struggles are acknowledged and shared, while women's experiences are often overlooked or quietly pushed aside.

In the story, patriarchy operates not only as an abstract structure but as a lived social reality that shapes how Pushpa is seen, judged and treated. In the absence of markers such as *sankha* (conch bangles) or *sindur* (vermillion), she is denied full social recognition and her identity is rendered incomplete and open to suspicion. These cultural signs become more than symbols. They function as everyday tools through which belonging is granted or withheld. They determine not only social status but also access to dignity and respect. Her body, in this context, becomes a key site where patriarchal control is exercised. The description of her physical response—"Pushpa's heart was palpitating so hard" (Basu 31)—captures the internal toll of fear, anxiety and exclusion. At the same time, her appearance draws attention that heightens her vulnerability. The transformation of her hair from a marker of beauty into something that makes her conspicuous reveals how the female body is constantly exposed to scrutiny. This regulation is further reinforced through moral surveillance. Questions about her marital status and insinuations about her character reflect a deeply ingrained belief that a woman's presence in public, especially in economic roles, must be morally justified. Her labour as a hawker is not evaluated on its own terms. Instead, it is overshadowed by suspicion directed at her sexuality and respectability. In this way, patriarchy shifts the focus from what she does to who she is. It turns her very presence into something that must be explained and defended. Pushpa's silence in the face of ridicule—remaining quiet "even if her heart was on the point of breaking" (Basu 43)—must be understood within this context. It is not simply an expression of humiliation, but a careful, learned response shaped by the risks of speaking out. In a space where resistance may invite further exclusion or even harm, silence becomes a way of enduring, a strategy for survival within rigidly imposed boundaries. Patriarchy, therefore, not only structures her marginalisation but also shapes the terms on which she can respond to it. Pushpa's struggle for survival reveals how deeply patriarchy is embedded in the social and economic fabric of the narrative. Her exclusion from the male-dominated world of hawking is not accidental but produced through norms that restrict women's access to livelihood and public participation. Yet, within these constraints, her quiet determination that "I will do it...I can do it" (Basu 36) marks a small but significant act of

persistence. It does not overturn the system that limits her, but it reflects an ongoing effort to carve out space for herself within it, where survival itself becomes a form of resistance.

Non-physical Violence, Existential Struggle and Resilience

Pushpa's entry into the informal economy as a hawker foregrounds her attempt to transform vulnerability into agency. Her declaration, "I made them myself...The cost's two annas each" (Basu 39), asserts both her labour and her self-reliance. However, this assertion is immediately undermined by the entrenched hierarchies governing the hawkers' world. The informal economy, often imagined as a space of survival and opportunity, is instead revealed to be deeply gendered and exclusionary. Basu writes that "they were determined not to allow her to sell. She didn't know if she would ever meet those who had the power to grant her the legal right to sell. Those who already had a claim on the territory were hostile" (43). Basu further illustrates how the male hawkers collectively undermine Pushpa's endeavour: "Mockery and screams seemed to chase Pushpa all the way to Sealdah. Yesterday's events were repeated. Before Pushpa could open her mouth, her voice was drowned in the uproar advertising many wares all together. The din continued till she reached her station" (43). Their collective opposition can be read as an instance of Pierre Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence. As Bourdieu explains in *Masculine Domination* (2001), symbolic violence is a form of "gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims" (1), enacted through everyday modes of communication and recognition that appear natural and legitimate. In this light, the act of drowning out Pushpa's voice exemplifies how domination is exercised not through overt force but through subtle forms of opposition and marginalisation. The male hawkers do not overtly expel her. Instead, by overwhelming her speech and presence, they reinforce a gendered hierarchy that both excludes her and renders that exclusion seemingly normal. This act operates as a kind of social regulation. It enforces unspoken norms about who is entitled to occupy public and economic spaces. It becomes emblematic of how power functions symbolically in the story by delegitimising her presence, undermining her claim to economic participation, and reinforcing gendered boundaries.

The hostility directed at Pushpa is further intensified through suspicion and rumour. The hawkers' speculations, such as "she must be close to the police" or has "worked out an arrangement with the rail babus" (Basu 43), serve to delegitimise her presence. It casts her as an outsider who has secured entry through illicit means. The cumulative impact of these

experiences becomes visible in Pushpa's physical and psychological decline. As Basu observes, "...the girl got thinner by the day. Her hair became knotted and unkempt. The same unwashed clothes that she wore daily were covered with dust" (Basu 43). This gradual deterioration reflects the embodied toll of sustained humiliation, exclusion, and stress. The intervention of the state, in the form of a police crackdown, introduces a different modality of power. When confronted with the question, "Do you have a licence?" (Basu 45), Pushpabala is unable to respond. Her inability to respond is not merely rooted in fear or confusion. It points to her structural exclusion from the very legal frameworks that govern the space she inhabits. The ultimatum "pay a fine of fifty rupees...or spend seven days in the lock up" (Basu 45) exposes the illusion of choice. For Pushpa, both options are equally punitive: the fine is beyond her financial reach, while imprisonment exacerbates her social and physical vulnerability. The state's intervention does not resolve the inequities of the informal economy but instead reinforces them by disproportionately penalising those at the margin. Rather than offering protection or legitimacy, the law functions as another mechanism of exclusion, intensifying Pushpa's struggle for survival in the unknown land.

The lock-up functions as a liminal space where previous distinctions are temporarily suspended. All hawkers, irrespective of gender, are subjected to the same conditions of confinement and deprivation. This shared experience of state violence creates the potential for new forms of recognition. The confiscation of goods and the stripping away of individual identities produce a collective condition of loss. Pushpa's emergence from the lock-up marks a critical turning point. Basu writes: "Her hair, now in tangles, seemed even more enormous. She walked barefoot, without sandals. Her eyes had developed blue rings and her cheeks were sunken. She walked, bent double from the waist. The glass bangles on her hands hung loosely. The bag hung from her shoulder" (46). Pushpa's altered appearance causes a change in the attitudes of the male hawkers. Their laughter, previously a means of mocking and humiliating Pushpa, is now "choked" (Basu 46). Haren's gesture of offering Pushpa a lozenge is particularly significant in this context. His statement, "Everyone who was in the lock up has earned a lozenge...you've got to take it" (Basu 46), reframes the basis of belonging as one grounded in shared suffering and experience. The emphasis on "everyone" points to an inclusive framework grounded in shared suffering rather than gendered hierarchy. However, it is important to recognise that this inclusion is neither complete nor permanent. The solidarity that emerges is fragile, contingent upon the shared experience of

state violence. It does not dismantle the underlying structures that produced Pushpa's exclusion in the first place. Instead, it creates a momentary space of recognition within an otherwise hostile environment. Pushpa's response—"her face broke into a fountain of laughter...her eyes filled with tears" (Basu 46)—captures the emotional complexity of this moment. The simultaneous expression of joy and sorrow reflects the ambivalence of her position. She is recognised, yet only within a marginalised collective. She is included, yet still vulnerable. The final image of Pushpa as belonging to "the ragged crowd of jailbirds" (Basu 47) encapsulates the paradox of her journey. Her inclusion is achieved not through the affirmation of her individuality but through her assimilation into a group defined by marginality. This raises important questions about the nature of agency and resistance in contexts of extreme precarity.

Conclusion

Pushpa's persistence throughout the narrative can be understood as a form of everyday resistance. She does not challenge the system directly but navigates it through endurance and adaptation. Her repeated attempts to sell her dolls, despite repeated failures, demonstrate a refusal to retreat into invisibility. This persistence, though limited in its impact, constitutes a significant assertion of agency within constrained circumstances. Pushpa's journey reveals the complex interplay of gender, displacement, and economic marginalisation in the aftermath of the Partition of India. Through the frameworks of intersectional vulnerability and symbolic violence, her experiences can be understood as the result of multiple, overlapping structures of oppression. Her journey from isolation to fragile inclusion highlights both the limits and possibilities of subaltern agency. While her final acceptance into the group of hawkers does not resolve the structural inequalities she faces, it offers a moment of recognition that affirms her human identity within a world that has consistently denied it.

Notes

1. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of "intersectionality" in her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989) to refer to

Black women's experiences of manifold oppression and exploitation. For details, see Crenshaw (1989).

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