



The passenger at the window seat: A memoir

_Shikhar Khanna

Stories/Memoirs

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The story

The story starts when I was travelling to my hometown for Holi. This is the story of a girl named Puja (pseudonym), a bar dancer by profession. In a crowded bus we were seated next to each other. After the first few hours of dilemma and awkwardness we finally struck a conversation.

After exchange of pleasantries I asked where she was going. She answered hesitantly that she is going to Kanpur as her father has lost his job during the pandemic and now she has become the sole breadwinner of her family. I had the impression of her being a student. Being curious I asked about her profession.

I could immediately notice her awkward hesitance. She fumbled and told "I am a bar dancer in Mumbai." Well ... I was taken aback! She ... doesn't look like a bar dancer! I know it's ridiculous to make judgments to stereotype someone's profession. But this realization came to me a bit late.

We carried on our conversation throughout the entire journey exploring different topics like hobbies, favorite food and similar things. But deep in my head I was deeply stigmatized. I don't know if my thoughts became apparent on my face after some time she asked me if I felt awkward.

I reluctantly said, "no ... but why did you feel like that?"

In a melancholy tone she replied, "I saw it on your face. Don't worry I get that all the time ... even from my parents."

Those were her last words ...

Pooja got off in the next stop and left me in a state of dismay. That was the moment I realized how judgmental I was. Stuck in my seat ... I was left with a lot of introspective thoughts which will form the rest of this blog.

The realisation ...

As I started thinking more about Pooja's story, a question became more and more prominent in my mind.

What's wrong in choosing the profession of 'bar dancing'? Pooja might not have chosen it out of her free will But what if she did? Is that wrong in anyway?

As I kept on thinking about all these, I felt sorry for the law student in me who have been struggling all these time to liberate himself from my stigmatized, judgmental self. After reaching home I started researching more about the profession and its fair share of legal battles.

Here is a snapshot of what I found ...

The Maharashtra Government banned bar dancing to protect girls from human trafficking, harassment, and rape. The government also introduced Sections 33A and 33B to the Maharashtra Police Law 1951 which prohibited any kind of dance performance in an eating-house permit room or beer bar. An exception was made in cases where such dance performances were to be held in 3-star hotels and not otherwise.

Challenging the measure, Bar dancing Indian Hotel and Restaurant Association (AHAR) filed the case sitting violation of fundamental rights under Article 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(g) before the Bombay High Court.[1]

But that is not what I want to talk about in this memoir.

Today, the story is not about these black letter provisions of law. The story is about Puja and many others like her who face different kinds of discriminations because of the interplay between their intersecting identities and the patriarchal mind-sets of our society.

Before I dwell further, I want to find "Who is Puja?"



Well ... the question seems to be a simple one. She is a bar dancer! Yes ofcourse! She is. But is that really the only identity that she possesses? The answer is no!

Let me recall my interaction with her and enumerate the various identities which makes the individual named Puja.

She is:

*A girl,
from a humble economic background,
Hindu (most likely) by religion,
well-educated,
bar-dancer by profession.*

Though these five identities are the ones I can presently think of from our brief interaction, there are several other identities that intersect with each other to create this individual named Puja. Ironically, as Kimberle Crenshaw mentions the reason for her discrimination in our society is also this very same intersection of her identities.[2] As an intersectional feminist, Crenshaw in her path-breaking research article, Mapping the Margins identified several layers of discrimination which a woman of colour goes through because of intersections of their identities.[3]

Similar to Crenshaw's arguments, Indian scholars of intersectionality including the likes of Chandra Mohanty and Nivedita Menon points out several such intersectionality-based discriminations which women in the 'third world' has to face in their daily lives.[4] I feel that Puja mortalises the insights of Mohanty and Menon in this context. I argue that it is not her profession only which is the reason for her discrimination. Rather it is the intersection of several of her identities (some of which I have mentioned above) which is at the root of it. In other words, the intersection of her identities as an individual creates a 'gender-based' role expectations to the patriarchal caretakers of the society.[5] The defiance of such expectations situates her at the cross-roads of several identities which is resulting at her present social positionality.

For how long?

Yes ... for how long will she be discriminated for being the individual she is?

For how long will she be facing this humiliation and ostracization for defying the red-eyed patriarchal bullies of our society?

For how long will we feel awkward even by the thought of interacting with her?

For how long will we merely have this realisation and not act upon it?

Works Cited:

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3. Menon, N, Seeing Like A Feminist. Pearson. 2012.
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About the Author

Shikhar is a fourth year student of Lloyd Law College in Noida. Shikhar's passion is to travel, watch movies and web series. He is also a prolific reader of novels and non fictions.
