



Narrative of Misrepresented Identity in “Coming Out as a Dalit: A Memoir”

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Abstract: This paper argues that the misrepresentation of Dalit causes persists, with damaging social consequences stemming from false portrayals of Dalit identity. It also explores why caste distinctions endure even without a traditional caste system within modern democratic discourse. Yashica Dutt's memoir blends political narratives with personal experiences, serving as a powerful social commentary. Through extensively researched arguments, she sheds light on the misrepresented identities of Dalits across various aspects of life. Her work not only exposes the daily indignities and violence faced by Dalits but also calls readers to confront caste-based injustices. Dutt's "Coming Out as a Dalit" is a compelling personal narrative and a rallying cry against systemic caste discrimination. Through her narrative, she confronts the lack of visibility for Dalit identities and emphasizes resilience, empowerment, and the ongoing struggle for social justice. Her memoir weaves together these intersecting threads, emphasizing that identity is multifaceted. By addressing intersectionality, she invites readers to recognize the interconnected nature of oppression and advocate for a more inclusive society. "Coming Out as a Dalit" is a powerful exploration of identity, resilience, and the need for authentic representation in a society marked by caste divisions.

Keywords: Invisibility, Misrepresentation, Dalits, Caste Identity, Intersectionality.

Introduction

The caste system in India is the paradigmatic ethnographic instance of social classification based on castes. It originates in India and was transformed by various ruling elites in medieval, early-modern, and modern India, especially in the aftermath of the collapse of the Mughal Empire and the establishment of the British Raj. "Coming Out as a Dalit" by Yashica Dutt marks her acclaimed debut in non-fiction, detailing her courageous journey as a Dalit woman in India. This memoir intertwines personal experiences with a thorough analysis of India's entrenched caste system. Dutt reveals the weight of concealing her Dalit identity and the fear of exposure; contrasting it with the empowerment she gained by embracing her true self and community. The book explores the history of the Dalit movement, challenges faced in education and cultural access, the importance of reservation policies, and the marginalization of Dalit voices in mainstream media. It is a compelling call to action, urging readers to confront caste injustices and advocate for meaningful change. Yashica Dutt's memoir, "Coming Out as a Dalit," presents a poignant narrative of grappling with misrepresented identity in the complex social landscape of India. Through her journey, Dutt unveils the profound challenges and transformative moments a Dalit woman faces, confronting societal prejudices and the burden of concealing her true identity.

Yashica Dutt's ground-breaking memoir delves into complex questions surrounding the invisibility and misrepresentation of Dalit identity and lived experiences. Why did Yashica Dutt and previous generations in her family choose to conceal their true identity? Why do Dalits sometimes adopt upper-caste norms and cultural identities to navigate India's caste-ridden society? Does living a dual life make things easier or more complicated for Dalits? And what happens when a Dalit proudly asserts their Dalit identity and fights for their rights? Are they applauded or punished? Furthermore, do media accurately depict the realities of Dalit lives? What about the aspirations of Dalit women? And do India's bureaucracy, judiciary, journalism, educational institutions, and political parties address the challenges faced by the 200 million Indian Dalits aptly?

As an urban Dalit, Dutt reflects on the complexities of city life, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about Dalits in urban spaces. Her activism connects her with other marginalized communities, highlighting the intersectionality of struggles related to caste, gender, sexuality, and disability. Yashica Dutt's memoir, "Coming Out as Dalit," delves into the intersectionality of caste, gender, class, and activism. By revealing her own experiences, Dutt challenges the idea that identity can be neatly compartmentalized. Her narrative emphasizes agency, rejecting victimhood and disrupting stereotypes about Dalits. Through her visibility as a Dalit woman, she advocates for representation and invites readers to engage in meaningful dialogue about social

justice and equality (Verma). It's a powerful testament to the complexities of identity and the struggle for recognition and acceptance.

Misrepresented Identities

Yashica Dutt's memoir opens with her reflection on her upbringing and the intricate layers of deception she felt compelled to adopt in a society deeply divided by caste. Growing up in an environment where caste identities heavily influence social interactions and opportunities, Dutt describes the exhausting struggle of concealing her Dalit background due to fear and shame. This initial narrative underscores how caste-based discrimination profoundly impacts individual self-perception and integration within society. The bias, discrimination, and otherness that a Dalit faces in Indian society lead many Dalits to hide their Dalit identity. To grab equal opportunities, escape the trauma and hardships of being a Dalit, and hope and dream for a better future again Dalits hide their true identity. In urban spaces Dalits have been able to escape the discrimination based on the caste system by simply hiding their true caste identity by following the upper caste mannerisms and rituals but the dilemma of the hidden identity generates a sense of guilt and weighs heavy on the mind of such Dalits.

Throughout her memoir, Dutt delves into the broader implications of caste discrimination. She explores the historical origins of the Dalit movement, emphasizing the systemic barriers that Dalits face in accessing education, cultural representation, and socio-economic opportunities. By blending personal anecdotes with a rigorous analysis of social structures, Dutt highlights the intricate interplay between individual experiences and structural inequality. Her powerful narrative encourages readers to confront the stark realities of caste-based discrimination.

In the discourse of the Dalit movement, there has been a prevailing assumption that Dalit women are adequately included and represented. However, literary representations have consistently reinforced a stark gender divide between Dalit men and women. Dalit women are often depicted not only as peripheral figures in Dalit texts (Guru, 2008) but also as individuals who have suffered from the exploitative desires of men (Kumar, 2010). They are frequently confined to roles as 'mothers' and as victims of sexual exploitation (Rege, 1998). Her sexuality has been culturally defined through the lens of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1999) especially within the Dalit community. This phenomenon has transformed Dalit masculinity into a means of evaluating and shaping overall Dalit identity and politics. The juxtaposition of her body against the chaste and honorable body of upper-caste women has positioned her as sexually available to both upper and lower-caste men. Charu Gupta argues that the perceived 'loose' character attributed to Dalit women has exacerbated their sexual exploitation (2011). The intersection of caste and patriarchy on the bodies of Dalit women has subjected them to being acted upon and written about. This has led Dalit women to internalize the negative stereotypes associated with them and their vulnerability to violence. Yashica Dutt explains: "The weight of my Dalitness had settled so deep within me that I'd stopped feeling its weight or recognizing its presence" (Dutt, 2019)

Yashica Dutt's memoir, "Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir" represents a significant moment when she courageously disclosed her Dalit identity. This revelation freed her from the weight of secrecy and empowered her to embrace her true self. By doing so, she defied prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions about Dalit individuals, disrupting the narrative of invisibility and marginalization. Additionally, Dutt's memoir critiques mainstream media's role in perpetuating caste prejudices. She sheds light on the lack of Dalit representation in media narratives, emphasizing the suppression of Dalit voices and experiences. Through her personal journey, Dutt encourages readers to examine their own biases and advocate for a more inclusive society (Hussain, 2024). Interestingly, Dutt's great-grandfather denied formal education, and learned to write by scrawling in the dirt with a stick—a testament to the resilience of Dalits, akin to the perseverance of Black Americans (Cherechés, 2023).

The Hidden Identity and the Burden of Secrecy

In her book, Yashica Dutt vividly portrays the emotional struggle of concealing her Dalit identity. She recounts instances when she had to hide her heritage, fearing prejudice and discrimination. In the prologue, she eloquently expresses that hiding an aspect of your identity feels like living a dual existence. It creates a sense of not truly belonging anywhere, as you wear different masks in each sphere of life, artfully switching between them. Over time, these two lives blend together, and you lose sight of your authentic self.

Yashica pours out her emotions of fear, ambiguity, and guilt of living a lie:

THROUGH THE THREE YEARS I spent at St. Stephen's, I was worried about people finding out about my caste only when the result lists went up on the notice boards and my name was tucked under the SC/ ST category, or towards the end of the course when my classmates began discussing how easy it would be for a reserved category student to get into a good MBA college (Yashica, p.69)

During most of these discussions, Yashica Dutt remained silent because she struggled to explain why the prevailing assumptions weren't accurate. Her understanding of how reservations worked was incomplete. However, she grappled with feelings of guilt for accessing resources that some believed rightfully belonged to deserving upper-caste candidates. These individuals had internalized the argument often made by anti-reservationists: that reservations hindered opportunities for qualified upper-caste individuals in educational institutions and job markets. While they acknowledged the validity of this concern, their caste identity didn't significantly trouble them—although attending different Delhi University (DU) colleges might have yielded a different experience.

In his ethnographic study on low-caste communities in South India, Michael Moffatt (1979) argued that there exists a normative ideological and cultural consensus among both low and high castes that perpetuates the caste system. Moffatt suggested that they collectively uphold the fundamental assumptions and values of the caste system and "recreate virtually every relationship and institution from which they have been excluded due to untouchability" (89). This implies that even low castes, such as Dalits, adhere to an ideology that devalues them and contributes to their own denigration by, for example, evaluating themselves negatively. Majeed and Ghosh (1989) supported this notion of 'negative ingroup evaluation,' attributing it to an 'affective syndrome crisis' or a profound, unresolved identity crisis. The above arguments are true to a great extent but with time, tutelage, and changing social norms Dalits are now questioning such misrepresented and standardized identity forced upon 200 million Dalits. Yashica's memoir delves into such questions of misrepresented Dalit identity.

Dutt begins by describing the exhausting burden of living with a secret. She was terrified of being discovered, forced to conceal her true identity behind a fake upper-caste persona she had constructed for herself. The fear of exposure weighed heavily on her, and she grappled with the emotional toll of hiding her Dalit heritage. Yashika in her memoir confesses that pretending to be from a caste that's not Dalit is something like that. And there are so many of us who are living this lie. We avoid talking about caste, hoping to somehow find a place in the world of upper-caste that has been forbidden to us. We create upper-caste identities—stolen badges—that help us gain entry to a space that will reject us the moment it finds out who we really are. We nervously flash these IDs anytime we are grilled about our origins. Those who fail to exhibit satisfactory signs of upper-caste and those who refuse to be punished for trespassing, for being where they don't belong. Discrimination, humiliation, oppression are all penalties for not being upper caste, or simply for being Dalit. Our Dalitness is imprinted onto us through the burned bodies of our children, suicides of our PhD scholars and college students, rapes of young girls and women, asphyxiation of our manual scavengers and 'honour killings' of lovers. These penalties are so routine that they aren't even considered worthy of shock and outrage. Newspapers either skip these stories or stick them in the back pages, between the sports and the city sections.

Yashica narrates her Delhi university experience while staying in one of the hostels. Her mother used to visit her frequently. Her mother walked into the room the first time she came to visit, her clothes were soiled from the dirt from the train floor and she was carrying a duffel bag whose strap had broken on the way. It was when I saw the looks on the faces of my roommates that it hit me: Mum was no longer the glamorous, well dressed woman from my childhood. And with that single look, my roommates came to the conclusion that St. Stephen's or not, I wasn't one of them. And for the rest of the year that I stayed there, I wouldn't be able to overcome this (63). People are judged based on their appearances. Yashica had made her way to St. Stephen College with her hard work but yet she was not treated as the equal by the other upper caste girls.

Yashica writes how once The Guardian noted that a new 'middle class is developing in cities previously dominated by caste'. This was not entirely correct. A new middle class was emerging but not by displacing caste. The 'new middle class' had emerged out of the older existing structures of caste. While some Dalits (like me) speak good English as they attend English-medium schools, most still communicate in Indian languages. English-medium education, which is often privatized and costly, is not available to most Dalits. In the 'new' India, speaking good English was the mark of the new upper caste. But this did not mean that those of the lower caste would necessarily have a chance to improve their lives because those who were already upper caste were the ones speaking good English and could access these jobs. At the call centre, caste found its way into pre-shift conversations. When I refused to disclose mine, saying that my parents were progressive and didn't discuss these things at home, most of my colleagues assumed I was upper caste because of my English. I quit the job after two months and swore never to go back to a call centre again.

Journey to Self-acceptance

Yashica grapples with the burden of concealing her Dalit heritage and the eventual empowerment that comes from embracing her true self. Her life takes a pivotal turn when she decides to reveal her true identity as a Dalit. In doing so, she demonstrates vulnerability and immense courage, leaving a lasting impact on her friends, family, and the world. Throughout her journey, Dutt challenges stereotypes associated with Dalits, excelling academically and defying societal expectations. The memoir underscores the importance of authenticity and the emotional toll of living with a hidden identity. As the narrative unfolds, we witness her transformation—a powerful moment of empowerment as she sheds her false persona and fully embraces her Dalit heritage. "She sheds the false identity and embraces her Dalit roots."

Dalits spatial vulnerability extends within domestic and private spheres, which are fraught with issues of separateness and affirmation of difference. Dutt illustrates how caste identities permeate domestic spaces, from dietary practices to relationships and honour. As she narrates, private spaces especially houses are places where one's caste suddenly matters, where one is asked about their background and forefathers, all in an effort to pinpoint his or her caste (xviii), revealing the intricate web of "caste-mediated household space" (Geetha, 2018). V. Geetha contends that households play a pivotal role in sustaining caste hierarchies by regulating spatial use, intimacy and social bonds (96).

Bianca Cherechés (2023) explores how contemporary caste relations and identities in India increasingly emphasize cultural aspects such as dietary habits, appearance, and occupations. This cultural framing of caste moves away from traditional biological descent-based distinctions, instead perpetuating caste as cultural communities with distinct practices and identities. Natrajan also discusses caste in terms of contemporary dynamics: he presents caste as a private practice through endogamous marriages, contrasting this with the harsher concept of 'caste atrocity', where caste-based violence is starkly visible. Natrajan identifies two contemporary modes of neo-casteism: 'heterophobia', which involves a fear of social 'difference' leading to separation or assimilation, and 'heterophilia', which fetishizes cultural distinctions. Both modes, however, contribute to monopolistic caste strategies.

However, this cultural perspective on caste is not divorced from power dynamics. Claims to cultural identity are intertwined with class-based ideologies, and the culturalization of caste risks normalizing caste divisions under the guise of celebrating diversity. This can undermine efforts to challenge caste-based discrimination and inequality. In the global context of cultural rights and multiculturalism, caste identities are increasingly publicly and politically recognized as cultural or ethnic diversity, further contributing to social fragmentation.

Yashica delves into the lives of her grandparents who have been civil servants and the discord between her parents. She in detail explains how her family have been successful to hide their Dalit identity and access some of the resources otherwise accessible to upper caste only. Her mother represents the category of 'triple Dalits'. She could not fulfil her aspirations to become a civil servant. Her husband has been an abusive partner and an alcoholic. It was only because of her efforts that Yashica and her other siblings could get good education. Yashica's mother took great pains to hide their Dalit identity so that her kids could live a better life.

Yashica recounts her traumatic experience of coming to terms with her misrepresented identity and false existence imposed upon her by her circumstances, ignorance, and the casteist society. She narrates how "she seesawed between anger and sadness every time I thought about how I had gone for so long without asking why. Why had I overlooked the fact that caste was an artificial construct without logic or reason? Why hadn't I realized that what I had accepted as normal was an unfair set of practices created so that the powerful could retain their power?"

Yashica says that for many, that journey from acceptance to anger to challenging the caste system starts with Ambedkar. But for her journey to start, she had to leave India so she didn't have to worry about what would happen if people found out about her caste. In Delhi, she could not declare her lower caste because the demands of daily living and making ends meet were tough enough. Adding Dalitness to that could topple her already unstable life and threaten any opportunities that could come her way. "I was too worried, too weak, too tired, to face the fallout. Only when I moved to New York, where caste was not an issue, did I learn to accept my lower caste. And during those months in Columbia in 2015, I stopped hiding from myself" (136).

Hiding the caste identity has been the sole motive while in India. But when she moved to Columbia Yashica in the beginning felt that she could not speak about it even there. She narrates:

I refrained from sharing my experience several times before because I feared it would seem insignificant compared to others' stories. To me, the discrimination I faced due to my lower caste was a daily occurrence, just routine. It was simply the norm, something I and everyone else around me grew up accepting. I almost believed discussing how I had pretended to be upper caste for so long would be a waste of their time. But as I began talking about how the caste system affected my life and the lives of millions of others, my classmates were shocked. They did not understand how I had not seen that this was a deeply unfair system. As I spent my life trying to be as upper caste as I could, questioning why my caste was considered lower didn't even occur to me. But the horror and righteous anger of my classmates helped me see that I had been cheated—into believing that my caste was 'low', that being lower caste was shameful and, most importantly, into accepting that the only way I could progress in life was by pretending to be upper caste. (135)

Dutt's journey through educational institutions reveals the intersection of caste and learning. She discusses the lack of representation and the erasure of Dalit voices in academic curricula. Her advocacy for inclusive education underscores the need to address caste-based inequalities within educational systems. The memoir encourages dialogue about privilege, social change, and the role of individuals in challenging systemic inequalities.

Social Hierarchies and Reservation

Yashica Dutt sheds light on the deeply entrenched caste system in India. She explores the inequities, discrimination, and privilege associated with caste and reservation. Reservation policies in India were implemented to rectify historical injustices experienced by marginalized communities such as Dalits (Scheduled Castes) and Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes). These policies aim to ensure equal opportunities and representation for these groups in education, employment, and public life. Despite some advancement, Dalits continue to confront discrimination based on their caste identity. Social prejudices persist, impacting their daily experiences. Unlike the "creamy layer" concept applied to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), economic advancement alone does not shield Dalits from caste-based biases. Even in competitive examinations like the UPSC Civil Services, Dalit candidates often face lower interview scores due to implicit biases, despite excelling in written tests. Reservation policies provide legal safeguards against discrimination and prevent Dalits from reverting to marginalization. They facilitate access to education and government employment, crucial avenues for social mobility. While reservation primarily affects universities and public sector jobs, it remains vital for ensuring equitable representation. Reservation serves as a crucial tool in combating social discrimination and fostering inclusivity. It underscores the fact that economic progress alone cannot eliminate deeply ingrained biases.

Yashica contends that universities and colleges, intended as hubs for innovation and critical thinking, often devolve into environments marked by discrimination, exclusion, and systemic harassment. Young minds are bred with hate, ready to assert their caste hierarchy over the next generation. Students are not taught why reservation is essential for those from the lower castes, who have been excluded from education, art, culture and even owning property, to reach a somewhat level playing field. Without reservation, Dalits will remain on the fringes, unable to access even the most basic opportunities. The toxic and dangerous narrative about merit that exists around reservation can be traced back to a 1980 report. (79)

In various colleges of Delhi University and many other universities nationwide, there exists a pervasive issue of caste discrimination. Dalit students and faculty often encounter significant hurdles due to their identification under reservation policies, leaving them vulnerable to mistreatment and exploitation by college authorities. Problems include delayed processing of application forms, prolonged approval times, and significant delays in scholarship disbursement, which can stretch on for months or even years. This discrimination is not confined to Delhi University but is prevalent across state and central universities mandated to adhere to reservation policies. The case of Rohith Vemula at Hyderabad University serves as a poignant example, where he faced severe financial hardship due to delays in his grant, ultimately relying on the support of friends and well-wishers to survive.

Yashica explains the discrimination and differences attached to caste hierarchy. While both Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalits have suffered marginalization under the caste system, there is a crucial distinction between them: the issue of untouchability. Discrimination and mistreatment worsen further down the caste hierarchy, with Dalits occupying the lowest rungs. Before Independence, a few Dalits managed to enter certain professions, such as my mother's great-grandfather who served in the British Army. However, after India gained independence, many Dalits entered the new nation impoverished and illiterate, lacking significant land or property. Access to education and government jobs provided many Dalits with financial stability for the first time, a standard enjoyed by most upper castes. Despite reservation policies, Dalits continue to face discrimination, irrespective of their economic status.

The constitutional reservation allows Dalits to enter and survive in a system that tries to keep them on the periphery. The system is designed to keep Dalits confined to undesirable professions. Dalits who use the reservation policy to advance are accused of being 'opportunistic' for using their only option for progress. Thousands of years of religious and social policies that denied education to Dalits are discounted and they are regularly challenged to prove their talent without using the 'crutch' of reservation. The reservation allows Dalits entry into the upper-caste system, but only their drive, talent, and ability create genuine, viable opportunities for them to get ahead. (3)

Caste, Education and Historical Context

Yashica Dutt explores the history of Dalits, emphasizing their struggles and contributions while advocating for inclusive education that honors Dalit perspectives. She examines the controversial concept of Sanskritisation, which has been imposed on lower castes under the promise of improving their lives through imitation. This approach has often proven flawed and harmful, particularly at a psychological level, causing division within the Dalit community and undermining their collective identity. Dutt underscores the diversity among Dalits, which complicates efforts for unity and solidarity, necessitating recognition of their distinct realities. She also questions the legitimacy of middle-class Dalits representing the interests of their less privileged counterparts and highlights how Sanskritization intensifies oppression faced by Dalit women within patriarchal family structures, regardless of their education or employment status.

Before identifying herself as a Dalit, Yashica successfully passed as an upper-caste Hindu. The term "passing" is well-documented among African Americans, where individuals mimic the customs, traditions, and behaviors of the majority community, often to avoid systemic racism and oppression. Similarly, Dalits in India have historically passed as upper-caste Hindus, especially after equal rights were guaranteed by the Constitution. This involves significant lifestyle changes such as changing surnames, relocating, adhering strictly to Brahminical traditions, adopting vegetarianism, and demonstrating heightened religious devotion to appear more like upper-caste Hindus.

In the 1950s, sociologist M. N. Srinivas coined the term "Sanskritization" to describe this phenomenon within the caste system, where lower castes adopt upper-caste traditions as a means of social advancement. However, this concept has been criticized for not acknowledging other avenues through which lower castes empower themselves, such as gaining political influence and economic prowess. Sociologist Dr. Kancha Ilaiah, in his influential work "Why I am not a Hindu" (1996), provides a more nuanced analysis. He explains how Shudras, now constitutionally termed Other Backward Classes (OBCs), emulate caste structures associated with Kshatriyas (the ruling caste) in pursuit of greater political power.

Yashica exposes the phony and misleading Sanskritized values borrowed by educated Dalits. She demonstrates how her family and grandparents who were influenced by Neo-Kshatriya and Sanskritized Dalit identities, tried to keep a delicate balance between Brahminical and Dalit-Bahujan principles. Women like my mother face the compounded challenges of gender-based oppression from Brahminical traditions and caste-based discrimination from the Dalit community. These factors create a complex environment that shapes their lives. Her grandfather, inspired by Dalit-Bahujan principles of equal opportunity, encouraged her mother's ambitions. However, patriarchal Brahminical values prioritized her mother's marriage over her aspiration to join the police force. Similarly, in Yashica's father's family, patriarchal norms were threatened by her mother's ambitions. Yet they didn't object when she worked low-paying jobs to support the family, likely because their son wasn't earning.

Yashica asserts that despite education for Dalits, the persistent gaps in overcoming untouchability, social exclusion, and equal opportunities remain evident even today. She supports her argument with examples from key institutions of Indian democracy: bureaucracy, judiciary, parliament, and journalism, highlighting the disparities rooted in the caste system.

UNTIL THREE GENERATIONS AGO, DALITS were denied access to learning. My great-grandfather defied this social order and learned to write by scrawling in the mud with a stick. His son, my grandfather, like many others of his generation, fought every step of the way to enter the civil services. (1)

However, although passing the exam may grant access to wealth and official power, social acceptance remains elusive for most Dalits. Examples include subordinates disregarding protocols due to a senior officer's lower caste, obstacles to promotions despite meeting qualifications, and refusals of desired postings—all common experiences within the civil services for Dalits. An article in Firstpost contemplated this possibility while reporting that out of '431 officials at the secretary, special secretary, additional secretary and joint secretary levels in various central ministries and department...[o]nly 28 officials belong to the SC category and 12 to the ST category'(2) . The lack of Dalits among India's thirty-one cabinet secretaries, who are chosen from civil servants, might see a shift with Tina Dabi, a proud Dalit who topped the 2015 Civil Services Examination at the age of twenty-two, potentially paving the way for change.

The news of Dabi achieving the top rank in the examination sparked celebrations among Dalits and their supporters, but also drew bitter criticism from others. Critics argued against the reservation system, pointing out that Dabi used it for the preliminary exam despite her exceptional performance in the main exam, surpassing both general and reserved category candidates. This achievement was used by opponents of reservations to claim that Dalits do not face discrimination and thus do not need reservation. Whenever a Dalit succeeds, some argue that it invalidates the necessity of reservation, a viewpoint often used to shame Dalits who benefit from it. Interestingly, similar arguments are not applied to economically disadvantaged upper-caste farmers who receive government aid and subsidies. This underscores the societal challenges that hinder Dalits from thriving.

Yashica says that this caste discrimination is quite rampant in journalism as well. But even English newsrooms which, from my experience, stick to a 'don't ask don't tell' policy, are no less of a minefield for a Dalit journalist. Ashraf discovered that an otherwise neutral journalist would be 'accused' of being lower caste if they stood up for Mayawati or protested the media's decades-long sexist coverage of her haircuts, outfits, or 'lack of style'. Or, conversely, a Dalit journalist who was open about their caste would be called 'biased' for covering caste issues or criticized for colonizing a particular beat. Jeffrey found most English media editors assume that Dalit journalists cannot write or communicate in English and use that as a reason for not hiring them. English-language journalists and reporters with a poor grasp of the language aren't a Dalit problem. It's an Indian journalism problem.

Dutt skilfully intertwines personal narratives with political analysis, compelling readers to confront caste injustices and fostering dialogue about privilege and social change. In the second decade of the new century, being Dalit encompasses a diverse range of experiences. For some, it entails a lifetime of discrimination and abuse, while for others; it provides access to constitutional reservations for socioeconomic improvement.

Understanding the Inequities

As Dutt delves deeper into her identity, she grapples with the inequities perpetuated by the caste system. She confronts the crushing guilt of denying her history—the struggles of her grandparents and the many Dalit reformers who fought for equal rights. Her personal story intertwines with the broader narrative of the Dalit community, emphasizing the urgent need for awareness and action. Christian and Muslim Dalits, who lack significant political leverage, often find their concerns marginalized by those in power. Since their voting bloc is not decisive in elections, political parties frequently neglect their rights without facing consequences. It is unsurprising that their struggle against discrimination remains unresolved, pushing some to contemplate abandoning their faith. While Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist Dalits may benefit from constitutional reservations and legal protections, they encounter similar apathy from policymakers and violence from upper castes. This echoes Rohith's sentiment in his letter, where he lamented being reduced to a mere voting category rather than recognized as a unique individual deserving respect and dignity.

Yashica's family struggles in poverty when she was young. Even among relatively affluent Dalit families, the act of presenting oneself as upper caste remains essential for social integration. 'Books were never denied, music was cultivated like a subject... Festivals and food celebrated with aplomb. Clothes and appearances were cared for, shoes were always polished,' Even as Mum took me around the city buying unnecessarily expensive daily comforts, she knew there was one thing she had little control over—my skin colour. More wheatish/tan than fair, it was close to her own colouring and she worried that all her effort to stage-manage our affluence and in effect our upper-castenness would get upended by my 'not so fair' skin shade (27). Yashica notes how in India the skin colour also marks your identity as upper caste or a lower caste Dalit. Dutt writes, "In modern India, caste and colour are deeply connected, with both being equated with notions of purity/cleanliness and impurity/ pollution. Some scholars still argue that Dalits and tribals are descended from the darker indigenous Dravidians and the upper castes from lighter-skinned Aryans" (28). However this notion is completely false for most of the India is brown skinned and such kind of colour tag is falsifying, misrepresented and an effort on the part of skin care industry and marriage industry to put a whole lot of pressure on the girls to look fair and acceptable.

Yashica also raises the issue of manual scavengers and the neglect of their cause as well as the prejudice against them. She argues that Dalits who work as manual scavengers lead rather short lives encumbered with illness, disease, and penury. On average, a Dalit male manual scavenger earns less than `6,700 a month for entering six or seven clogged sewer manholes daily. Often, they don't get paid on time, or at all. Yet, manual scavengers have few options for sustenance outside their dehumanizing and dangerous profession (44). If India truly intends to become post-caste in the next few centuries, ensuring no Dalits need to deal with someone's

filth just to survive is the place to start. “This indifference to Dalit lives and health stems from the long held idea that as long as they are paid a few rupees, they should be risking their lives to clean society’s filth, because ultimately that’s what they were born to do.” (43)

Exploring Dalit History

Dutt emphasizes the importance of understanding the past to address present-day challenges. She advocates for a more inclusive education system that acknowledges Dalit voices and their role in shaping India’s social fabric. She explores colonial Dalit history and realizes that British passivity to caste hierarchies extended to education. Since Dalits were not allowed education under the caste system, the British did not force schools to admit Dalit children. They set up separate schools for Dalits and Bahujans, but the teachers (most of whom were Brahmins) would often refuse to teach them. They argued that if Dalits were trained as teachers, it would have calamitous consequences as the gods would be displeased. Phule in 1872 questioned why no such calamity had hit the country when ‘ati-shudras’ (Dalits) were enlisted in the British Army.

Even in British-run schools, education was heavily Brahminical and discriminated against Dalits. When Brahmins complained of textbooks that criticized the caste system, the British removed those textbooks. The British did not simply look the other way, allowing casteism to continue unabated. They built entire systems that they handed over to the upper castes so they could continue to discriminate against and exclude Dalits. The British administration in India comprised a small number of Britons.

It was the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas who became part of the bureaucracy while Dalits were kept to their traditional roles. Brahmins, in particular, became auxiliary rulers of the country (where earlier it had been the Kshatriyas) and were ‘trained through apprenticeship in the art of modern ruling’ (15). It wasn’t just administration that the British handed over to the upper castes. They also gave the upper castes power over land and agriculture, the largest source of livelihood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The British were not interested in administering the colonies, but were interested in the money made from taxes imposed on farmers. The upper castes now began to create policies and subsequently even the entire administrative structure that served their interests. Brahmins were appointed to explain local laws and practices to British judges. This meant that Dalits did not even get a chance to have their cases heard properly. Since the presence of a Dalit was considered polluting, they were not allowed anywhere near the Brahmin assistants of the judges. Instead, they would shout from one end of the room (sometimes from outside the room) and important details were often lost as a result of this practice.

At Independence, the British handed over the bureaucracy, judiciary, agriculture, media and education to the upper castes. They created the template on which, according to Aloysius, the future of India was to be constructed. At the time of Independence, when most Dalits were still learning to read, upper-caste people had been businessmen, bureaucrats, journalists, lawyers, judges and politicians for several generations. When the British left, they were trained and ready to take over the reins of the new country. Dalits continued to struggle in the system that was still controlled by the upper castes.

Education in British schools that introduced the ideas of equality and liberty allowed Dalits to reject the narrative of upper-caste superiority. The introduction of technology and mass communication—radio, magazines, and newspapers—allowed Dalit printing presses to educate Dalits about their rights. While the British never chose Dalits to lead departments or administrative work, Dalits could still access public employment. Even at the lowest rungs, it provided some relief from their dehumanizing caste-based professions. My mother’s grandfather was able to think of a different future for his family. Instead of our caste profession of manual scavenging, he joined the British Indian Army. These professions helped Dalits imagine new futures for themselves and their children (15). Passively however British rule did minimally help to loosen the hold of untouchability by providing education and employment at lower rungs for Dalits.

Media Representation

In her memoir, Dutt eloquently highlights the scarcity of Dalit voices in mainstream media. She passionately calls for action, urging society to amplify these voices and challenge prevailing narratives. Dutt emphasizes the importance of reservation policies and advocates for increased representation of Dalit women, whose significant contributions often remain unnoticed. Unfortunately, Dalit voices continue to be underrepresented and stereotyped, often viewed as untouchables or victims of discrimination. Through personal anecdotes, Dutt sheds light on instances where the media misrepresents Dalits, sharing experiences from interviews, articles, and TV shows. Her memoir serves as a powerful reminder of the need for accurate representation and the ongoing struggle to navigate media spaces.

Yashica exclaims, “I started the Documents of Dalit Discrimination because all I saw in the media and popular entertainment were stories about victimized Dalits, or those undeserving of reservation. There were no stories about people like me” (158). It’s disheartening that people often stereotype based on language proficiency or socio-economic background which is a complete misrepresentation of Dalit mass. Yashica Dutt’s experience resonates with Chimamanda Adichie’s observation. The assumption that certain abilities or talents are exclusive to specific backgrounds perpetuates harmful biases. Recognizing and celebrating diverse talents, regardless of social status, is essential for a more inclusive society.

Among the many messages I received after I came out as Dalit, several expressed amazement that I could speak English. It was almost as if without going through horrific violence or abuse or growing up in extreme poverty in a remote rural area, I couldn’t possibly be Dalit. In her immensely popular 2009 TED Talk, Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie recalls how as a young girl she

was shocked to find out that a family member of her domestic helper made beautiful baskets. All she had heard of his family so far were that they were poor. The idea that they could also make something beautiful had never even occurred to her. (158)

Chimamanda Adichie aptly refers to this phenomenon as “The Danger of a Single Story.” When society only hears one narrative about a particular group—such as Dalits being portrayed solely as victims or reservation beneficiaries—it oversimplifies their experiences. It’s crucial to recognize the multifaceted lives and contributions of Dalits beyond these narrow stereotypes.

Yashica advocates the need for multiple narratives to represent multifaceted lives. She concurs that when Ishe wrote the note in which she came out as a Dalit, she was sitting in a comfortable chair in a café in Chelsea, far away from her caste roots. “Even before I wrote the note, I had decided that I wasn’t going to work in an Indian newsroom again. So by outing myself as Bhangi, I didn’t feel like I was putting my career on the line. If some people decided I was less worthy or less qualified because of it, I didn’t have to work with them.” (58-159).

Dutt further discusses the lack of Dalit voices in mainstream media. She emphasizes the need for representation and challenges existing narratives..She came to a significant realisation that there might be many other Dalits with similar experiences oh hidden identity like her. While the media often portrays Dalits in narrow roles—as either victims or opportunists—it fails to capture the complex lives of those who navigate dual identities. Some Dalits do pass as upper-caste individuals, concealing their true background due to societal biases. Their struggles, emotional turmoil, and the toll of hiding their identity deserve recognition.

She researched and found out that there are excellent narratives that address the direct consequences of being Dalit, particularly in the works of Baby Kamble (The Prisons We Broke, 2008) and Urmila Pawar (The Weave of My Life, 2007). She eloquently expresses the need for a safe space where Dalits who pass as upper caste can share their experiences without judgment. Her initiative to create a Tumblr page for this purpose is commendable. It’s essential to amplify marginalized voices and provide a platform for authentic storytelling. Her narrative intertwines with broader social issues, emphasizing the power of storytelling in shaping perceptions.

Indian cinema plays a significant role in shaping public perception, and unfortunately, it often perpetuates stereotypes about Dalits. Even reformist films from the thirties and forties, influenced by Ambedkar’s ideology and Gandhi’s upliftment programs, depicted Dalit characters facing discrimination and abuse without providing any resolution. This portrayal contributes to the prevailing image of Dalits as victims living in poverty in rural areas. Yashika writes that according to many of these movies, including the massively popular Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani-starrer AchhutKanya (1936), the only way to end discrimination was by killing the Dalit character. Over the decades, as the stories evolved and the mostly upper-caste lead pairs found t different scenarios to fall in love, the Dalit character has remained the same. (176)

Yet, many are unaware that caste prejudice has been linked to a ‘darker’ skin shade since before the British arrived. Academic Radhika Parameswaran researched transnational media activism targeting colorism, beauty, and sexism in India a few years ago, and talks of a strong cultural perception that links skin color and caste. Classical texts dating to the pre-British era also seem to identify cannibalism with darker-skinned tribals in the subcontinent. The idea that equates fairness with a higher caste had existed long before the eighteenth century. Some Brahmins and Kshatriyas, who were generally paler skinned, used the eugenics argument to justify the caste system and declare themselves as ‘Aryan’ or European. (28)

In modern India, caste and colour are deeply connected, with both being equated with notions of purity/cleanliness and impurity/pollution. Some scholars still argue that Dalits and tribals are descended from the darker indigenous Dravidians and the upper castes from lighter-skinned Aryans. Unsurprisingly, this theory as well as the heavily debunked eugenics argument continue to be widely popular among caste supremacists. It’s alarming to note the regularity with they appear in the arguments of online trolls hoping to justify casteism, even in recent years. Taunting people, especially women, for their dark skin is so ingrained, particularly in north Indian culture, that a popular comedy show on national television saw nothing wrong in airing an episode mostly centred around ridiculing a dark-skinned actress. “Upper caste=fair skin=touchable. Lower caste=dark skin=untouchable.” (29)

Yashica appreciates the efforts of various Dalit activists who are shining a spotlight on Dalit marches and protests, often overlooked by mainstream media. Collaboratively, these websites are reshaping the Dalit narrative, making it harder to dismiss them as merely Dalits agreeing with each other. These platforms not only support one another but also generously share resources—papers, data, and research—without paywalls, allowing anyone to access and distribute them. Attri, for instance, contributes articles to Ambedkar’s Caravan without asserting copyright. Unlike other publications that selectively choose writers, these sites welcome submissions from any Dalit-Bahujan individual, regardless of their academic or literary background. However, this openness also exposes them to potential appropriation, particularly by upper-caste academics and media outlets.

Yashica Dutt acclaims that after years of research, Dalit websites have collected reams of crucial data about caste in India, often with few resources and little funding. Many activists have spent years going door to door to gather this data. While the mainstream media and to a large extent even academia has more or less ignored caste issues for years, the sudden prominence of these websites has forced them to acknowledge these issues. But rather than invest in research, most media outlets find it convenient to use their work without permission or even credit. Almost all Dalit-owned websites face blatant plagiarism, and find their work paraphrased without context mostly by upper-caste authors and academics. While they try to highlight this issue through their social media channels, ultimately these websites are no match for the media giants they are up against. (171)

Conclusion

In her memoir “Coming Out as a Dalit: A Memoir,” Yashica Dutt skillfully explores intersectionality—the intricate interplay of various social identities and systems of oppression. She sheds light on how caste intersects with other dimensions of identity. Dutt’s experiences as a Dalit woman shape her perspective. She grapples with the intersection of caste-based discrimination and gender bias, revealing the unique challenges faced by Dalit women who navigate both caste oppression and patriarchal norms. The memoir also delves into socioeconomic disparities, discussing how caste intersects with class, impacting education, employment, and opportunities. It emphasizes that caste discrimination transcends financial status. The caste system permeates every aspect of Indian life, exerting both invisible and powerful influence. While privileged individuals may not always perceive its impact, it remains a harsh reality for those disadvantaged by this system. Yashica believes that by amplifying the voices of those affected and supporting those who fight against it, we can strive toward a post-caste society.

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