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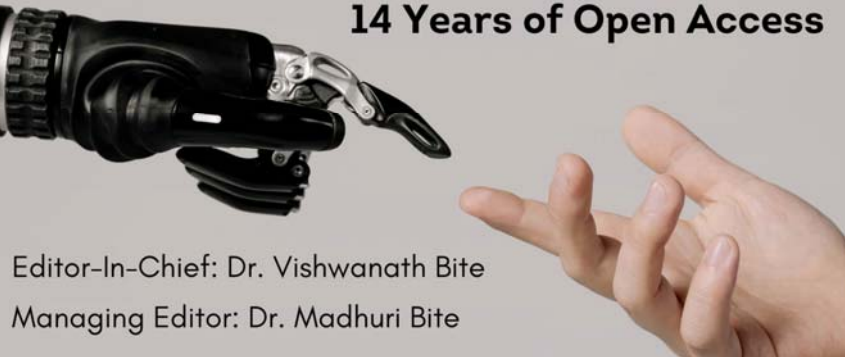
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Personal Narratives and Dalit Women's Assertion in Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit*

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Abstract:

This article examines Yashica Dutt's memoir, *Coming Out as Dalit*, as a significant act of resistance, situating her personal narrative within the larger framework of Dalit autobiographical writing in India. In a society where caste-based prejudice remains pervasive, Dutt's decision to openly embrace her Dalit identity confronts the deeply entrenched stigma and silence surrounding caste. Through recounting her personal experiences, Dutt not only reclaims her identity but also sheds light on the systemic discrimination faced by Dalits across both rural and urban settings. Her memoir serves as a critical social commentary, exploring the intersections of caste, class, and privilege. This article further explores how Dalit autobiographies, such as Dutt's, function as protest literature, providing marginalized voices with a platform to challenge dominant caste narratives. By doing so, these works confront the historical invisibility of Dalit experiences and foster collective empowerment. Dutt's narrative becomes symbolic of the broader fight for Dalit rights and representation in contemporary India, highlighting the transformative role of storytelling in combating caste oppression.

Keywords: Dalit identity, Caste oppression, Intersectionality, Dalit feminism, Social mobility and Protest literature.

Introduction:

Yashica Dutt's "*Coming Out as Dalit*" transcends boundaries of a typical memoir; it acts as a political declaration and a critical examination of India's entrenched caste system. Through her personal narrative, Dutt confronts the realities of caste, gender, and privilege in Indian society, contributing significantly to the tradition of Dalit autobiography. Viewed through a Dalit feminist lens, Dutt's memoir not only highlights the overlap of caste and gender oppression is addressed, while also reclaiming the stories of Dalit women, who have frequently been pushed to the margins in both mainstream feminism and Dalit activism.

The Politics of "Coming Out" as Dalit: A Public Declaration of Identity

The term "coming out" is commonly linked to the LGBTQ+ movement, signifying the act of publicly embracing a hidden identity due to societal stigma. By applying this concept to caste, Dutt underscores the deep-seated secrecy and shame that many Dalits endure in concealing their caste identity. For years, she felt compelled to present herself as "upper caste," a strategy that provided her with access to educational and career opportunities without the direct discrimination typically faced by Dalits.

In her memoir, Dutt articulates the complexities of negotiating her caste identity: "*I had done everything possible to look upper caste. My clothes, my skin color, the way I talked, what I read, how I carried myself—all of it was an effort to distance myself from my Dalit heritage.*" This reflection reveals the psychological burden of caste-based oppression, where individuals often suppress their true selves to navigate a society that marginalizes them.

Dutt challenges the idea that her Dalit identity should be a cause for shame by proudly embracing it. This courageous act of 'coming out' challenges a system that thrives on silence and invisibility, enabling her to reclaim her narrative and confront the casteist ideology that has long oppressed her community. Thus, her memoir operates as both a personal and political statement, subverting the dominant narrative that requires Dalits to remain unseen in order to succeed. Yashica Dutt wrote "*Coming Out as Dalit*" to address the pervasive caste discrimination she endured while concealing her Dalit identity. Throughout her upbringing, her family adopted the appearance of belonging to a higher caste to avoid societal prejudice. In 2016, the tragic suicide of Dalit scholar Rohith



Vemula, which drew national attention, became a pivotal moment for Dutt. His death, resulting from caste-based discrimination, deeply affected her and led her to publicly acknowledge her own Dalit heritage. In doing so, she began to examine the psychological and social consequences of caste discrimination. Through her memoir, Dutt seeks to challenge the stigma associated with being Dalit and inspire others to accept their identity without fear or shame.

Dalit Autobiography as Protest Literature

Historically, Dalit autobiographies have functioned as powerful forms of resistance, providing alternative narratives that counter mainstream depictions of Dalit experiences. These autobiographies are not merely personal accounts; they serve as political critiques that expose the systemic violence and exclusion faced by Dalits. In *“Coming Out as Dalit”*, Dutt situates her own story within this tradition, using her memoir to critique the pervasive casteism that continues to shape Indian society.

Viewed from a Dalit feminist perspective, Dutt's memoir addresses the intersectionality of caste and gender. She discusses the unique challenges that Dalit women face, who are doubly marginalized by both their caste and gender. *“For Dalit women, there is no escape from discrimination. It comes at you from all sides—from men, from upper castes, and even from within the Dalit community,”* she notes. This observation underscores the multi-layered oppression that Dalit women experience, which often goes unrecognized in both feminist and Dalit discourse.

Dutt's narrative serves as a form of protest literature that resists the historical marginalization of Dalit experiences. In sharing her story, she actively resists the dominant caste ideology that attempts to silence her voice. Dalit voices and challenges the myth of caste neutrality in contemporary India. Her memoir sheds light on the ways in which caste continues to affect daily life, from education and employment to social interactions.

Caste and Gender: A Dalit Feminist Critique

“Coming Out as Dalit” provides a critical examination of both caste and gender oppression from a Dalit feminist perspective. Dalit women exist at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalization, experiencing oppression not only from their caste but also from patriarchal norms

within both upper-caste and Dalit communities. Dutt's memoir exposes this intersectional oppression, offering a nuanced understanding of how caste and gender shape the lives of Dalit women.

Dutt critiques the mainstream feminist movement in India, which has often been dominated by upper-caste perspectives. She points out that this form of feminism frequently overlooks the specific struggles faced by Dalit women, such as caste-based violence and social exclusion. *"Mainstream feminism, with its focus on issues like workplace discrimination and reproductive rights, often overlooks the lived realities of Dalit women, who are fighting battles on multiple fronts,"* she argues. This critique emphasizes the need for feminist movements to be inclusive and intersectional to address the diverse needs of all women.

Furthermore, Dutt highlights the patriarchal structures within the Dalit community, acknowledging that Dalit women often encounter gender-based oppression from Dalit men. *"Even within the Dalit movement, women's voices are often sidelined. Dalit men are fighting for their rights as oppressed people, but they sometimes forget that Dalit women are also oppressed by patriarchal norms,"* she states. This remark underscores the necessity of addressing gender inequality within marginalized communities, advocating for a Dalit feminist perspective that recognizes the unique challenges Dalit women face.

Education and Social Mobility: The Burden of 'Passing'

Dutt dedicates significant portions of her memoir to examining the role of education in Dalit lives. For many Dalits, education is viewed as a key means of achieving social mobility and escaping caste-based discrimination. However, Dutt's narrative reveals that education is not a simple path to liberation; it often involves its own set of challenges and compromises.

She describes the immense pressure to "pass" as upper caste to succeed academically and professionally. "Passing" necessitated not only concealing her Dalit identity but also adopting cultural markers associated with upper-caste status, such as fluency in English and specific styles of dress. *"Education was supposed to be my way out, but it also became the means by which I distanced myself from my roots. I had to erase my Dalit identity to be accepted in the elite spaces I aspired to enter,"* she explains.



This experience of passing highlights the limitations of education as a tool for empowerment. While it can open doors to opportunities, it often requires individuals to conform to upper-caste norms, suppressing their true identities. From a Dalit feminist perspective, this raises essential questions about the cost of social mobility for marginalized communities. Is true success achievable if it demands the erasure of one's identity? Dutt's memoir suggests that genuine empowerment can only arise from embracing one's identity and challenging the oppressive structures that demand conformity.

The Role of Representation and Voice

A key theme in *“Coming Out as Dalit”* is the critical importance of representation and voice. For far too long, Dalits have been excluded from mainstream narratives, with their voices silenced and their stories untold. Dutt's memoir serves as a powerful reminder of the need for Dalit voices to resonate across all spheres of society. *“For centuries, Dalits have been spoken about but rarely spoken to. Our stories have been told by others, but now it's time for us to tell our own,”* she writes.

This focus on self-representation is particularly vital for Dalit women, whose voices have been doubly marginalized. By sharing her story, Dutt reclaims her narrative and encourages other Dalit women to do the same, fostering a spirit of empowerment and resistance against caste and gender oppression.

From a Dalit feminist perspective, representation extends beyond mere visibility; it challenges the narratives that have historically justified oppression. Dutt's memoir disrupts the common narrative of caste as an irrelevant or outdated system, revealing how it continues to influence the lives of millions in contemporary India. Through her storytelling, she questions the myths of meritocracy and caste neutrality that often obscure the realities of caste-based discrimination.

Conclusion: The Transformative Power of Storytelling

In *“Coming Out as Dalit”*, Yashica Dutt offers a compelling critique of caste, gender, and privilege in India. Her memoir transcends a mere recounting of personal experiences; it represents a political act of resistance that confronts the structures of oppression still marginalizing Dalits, especially

Dalit women. From a Dalit feminist perspective, Dutt's work stands as a profound addition to Dalit autobiographical writing, offering a layered exploration of how the intersection of caste and gender intricately shapes the lives of marginalized individuals.

By openly 'coming out' as Dalit, Dutt reclaims her identity and challenges the stigma surrounding caste. Her memoir stands as a form of protest literature, countering the dominant caste ideology that seeks to render Dalit voices silent. Through her narrative, Dutt emphasizes the importance of representation, self-representation, and storytelling as essential tools for social change. Ultimately, "*Coming Out as Dalit*" highlights the transformative potential of memoir as a vehicle for resistance. By sharing her story, Dutt not only confronts societal norms but also inspires others to embrace their identities and advocate for justice against caste and gender oppression. In a world often characterized by silence, Dutt's voice emerges as a testament to the resilience of Dalit identity, paving the way for future generations to reclaim their narratives and assert their rightful place in society.

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