



Shrug off the Burden of Hiding Identity in Coming Out as Dalit by Yashica Dutt

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Abstract: A caste is a form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a style of life which often includes an occupation, status in a hierarchy, and customary social interaction and exclusion based on the cultural notion of purity and pollution. This social stratification is deeply rooted in society and even children also become conscious of their caste at a young age. The book *Coming Out as Dalit* talks about how finely caste exists among us that it often goes unnoticed. In this personal memoir which is also a narrative of the Dalits, the writer writes about the journey of coming to terms with her identity and takes us through the history of the Dalit movement; the consequences of her community's lack of access to education, and culture; the need for reservation; the paucity of Dalit voices in mainstream media; Dalit women's movements and their ongoing contributions, and attempts to answer crucial questions about caste and privilege. Woven from personal narratives from her own life as well as that of other Dalits, this book forces us to confront the injustices of caste and also serves as a call to action. The paper follows Dalit feminism as a methodology to analyze the text *Coming out as Dalit* by Yashica Dutt which represents a much significant issue of marginalized Dalit women. Dalit women are subjected to multiple oppressions based on caste, gender, and class. This paper argues how Dalit Women create their narratives about their atrocities and subvert other narratives to bring out Dalit women's empowerment, activism, and consciousness as an approach to social change. Apart from this, an exploration in this area may also help other marginalized groups to create potential through their narratives like biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs.

Index terms: Shrug off, caste, narrative, marginalized, Dalit feminism.

Introduction

Caste is an established reality in South Asia and South Asian communities across the world. Indian culture, in its broadest sense, while well known for its vibrancy in many aspects including food, dance, music, and art, also has the hierarchal order of caste at its center. In the past few decades, ever since Dalits were able to reach out to global communities to discuss their experiences, those belonging to the upper caste become more vehement in their attempts to distance Indian/Hindu from caste. They posit that the caste system was not truly a part of Hinduism until the arrival of the British in the 1600s when they created these artificial categories to divide the local population. Ambedkar also researched the means and causes that sustained caste in Hinduism for centuries. B R Ambedkar in his paper, 'Caste In India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development, he made presented a social phenomenon that emerged from the strategy of the Brahmins who adopted a strictly endogamous matrimonial regime, leading the other groups to do

the same to emulate this self-proclaimed elite. He said that "the superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste". Ambedkar focused/argued/concluded/limited caste to a single characteristic which is endogamy. By considering practices like Sati, the dehumanizing isolation of widows, and marriages of pre-pubescent girls too much older men just control the problems of men and maintain endogamy.

The various theories and historical controversies regarding the origins of caste in India are outside the scope of this paper to explore. The Manusmriti or the Law Code of Manu, probably drafted in the first or second century AD, is usually cited by Dalits as the ideological grounding of caste and women's oppression. This code blatantly justifies the exploitation of the Shudra caste, as well as denying equality or any respect to women of all castes. Barbaric punishments are recommended for Shudras and for women who revolt or simply question the status quo. Not only did the caste hierarchy help the local rulers of the tribal and feudal society in ancient and medieval India to exploit the people, but also the invaders who ruled India — despite their egalitarian religions of Islam and Christianity — continued to maintain the caste system for their convenience. As such, even in today's era of globalization, a feudal Brahminical caste culture coexists with the so-called modernization processes.

In the 1970s, the Ambedkarite and the Dalit Panthers movements in Maharashtra together gave rise to a new genre of Marathi literature which numbered among its writers some outstanding Dalit women authors. In their autobiographies, they depicted their experiences as women trapped within the layers of patriarchal ways and caste oppression. Dalit feminism is a new concept in women's studies, which has yet to be fully developed and articulated as a feminist theory. Dalit activists belonging to the Ambedkarite movement have not agreed to call their struggle, the struggle of Dalit feminists. Feminist analysts have coined this term after coming to the realization that mainstream feminists have ignored caste and mainstream Ambedkarites have in practice, shrugged aside gender. Caste is a distinctive issue in the life narratives of Dalit women since it complicates their lives. The selected text analysis reveals that Dalits are regarded as unclean and socially shunned. They are allocated marginalized positions on society's outskirts.

Need of the Study

Unlike the autobiographies of famous individuals, autobiographies by Dalits emphasize the ordinariness of their life rather than their uniqueness to establish themselves as the representative of their community. For a Dalit autobiography, "the entire life narrative is based on the idea of communal identity, and the subjectivity in these autobiographies is thus complicated by the deep connection between the individual self and the communal self" (Pandian 54). Besides this, the strength of Dalit autobiographies lies in their act of exposing the continuation of caste-based discrimination and the power structures and belief systems that support the practice of untouchability. Moreover, for Dalit writers, autobiography often constitutes their political act of assertion. Thus, for the Dalit community, autobiography is not simply a kind of literature but is a form of assertion of one's identity and resistance in its own right. Similarly, it has been already said that the Dalit autobiographies are representative of their respective communities and they assert their specific caste group identities through the personal narration of their life experiences. The attempts by Arjun Dangle, Baburao Bagul, and others have been to undermine the cultural hierarchies constructed by the upper castes. They have tried to present the existential reality of the Dalits with remarkable ability and courage. Their writings have offered an opportunity and promise to raise awareness about the subjugation of the Dalits. They have concentrated their literary energies to explore the cultural gaps and the Brahminical social order to win support for the downtrodden. Very objectively they have worked out the vulnerability of their low-caste protagonist and made their writing political. The portrayal of the adverse material conditions is done purposely to beg support for such of them that are scavengers if not worse living on the drags of the upper class and the edge of survival. Such representations of the Dalit identity that we get are enough to set the mind's thinking — are we still living in an age of inequality? How are we a democratic nation? How has the millennial change ushered in a more global order? To quote S.P. Punalekar, "Dalit literature upholds the view that this vast majority which is vulnerable and poor, untouchable and isolated, must be brought together. And to bring them together, they must be made conscious of their capacity as creative and worthy members of humanity. It is not a matter of shame or indignity to be a Mahar or Mang, Dhor or Chamar, Brad or Kaikadi (low castes or Dalits), Christian or Muslim. Caste or community does not pollute or criminalize society. It is rather the other way around; it is society, meaning its social

(economic) institutions and the underlying cultural system, which upgrades some members at the cost of others, i.e., by degrading them, dehumanizing, and marginalizing them (238).

Another strain in this line of thinking is rather akin to Alice Walker's womanism, whereby Dalit women activists realized that many Dalit men get humiliated by the upper castes and classes, and they transfer this domination onto Dalit women. If they could only come together, a unity of both genders would lead to Dalit emancipation. Ruth Manorama one of the activists in mainstream women's organizations says that Dalit and Adivasi women are not only overlooked in these organizations but most of the groups even did not notice that their issues are different from those of upper-caste women. Manorama finally quit the mainstream organization and founded NFDW (National Federation of Dalit Women) in 1995. While following the same footsteps down the line various Dalit women activists have been pushing it into the spotlight. In the historic 2001 UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and related intolerance in Durban, South Africa, Dalit women activists argued for casteism to be recognized as a massive injustice to millions of Indian lower-caste people.

The paper will begin with an assessment of the worldwide assumptions made by mainstream feminism which is supported by Dalit feminism. This will be followed by a discussion on caste as a social issue and how it affects the life lives of Dalits and especially that of Dalit women and place them in a peripheral position in Indian society. The paper's justification is that straightforward feminist themes fall short of illustrating the plight of Dalits who are oppressed in Indian society. The essay further argues that black feminism has destroyed the global presumptions made by western feminism.

Theoretical Framework

The memoir *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) is written by Yashica Dutt who also writes on gender, identity, and culture. In this personal memoir that is also a narrative of the Dalits, she writes about the journey of coming to terms with her identity and takes us through the history of the various Dalit movements; the consequences of her community's lack of access to education, and culture; the need for reservation; the paucity of Dalit voices in mainstream media; Dalit women's movements and their ongoing contributions; and attempts to answer crucial questions about caste and privilege. Woven from personal narratives from her own life as well as that of other Dalits, this book forces us to confront the injustices of caste and also serves as a call to action.

Pretending not to be a Dalit took a heavy toll on the young Yashica Dutt. Her mother, Shashi, was so determined to protect her three children from the discrimination of the Hindu caste system that relegates Dalits to the periphery of society that she pretended the family was Brahmin. Shashi worked hard to find the money, throw birthday parties, have curtains on the windows, and follow traditional rituals correctly. But for the children, it meant that one wrong word or gesture while playing with friends or buying sweets from a shopkeeper could expose the lie. It was only after she had grown up, that Dutt, a writer, and journalist, began to understand the trauma of her childhood. When she began therapy in Delhi a few years ago, she simply asked her analyst to help her to live. "I was always second-guessing myself, wondering if I had said the right thing, asking myself 'would upper caste people with happier childhoods have said it better or done it differently?' I had so much doubt from feeling like an imposter," she says.

The author recounts the exhausting burden of living with the secret and how she was terrified of being found out. She talks about the tremendous feeling of empowerment she experienced when she finally stood up for herself and her community and shrugged off the fake upper-caste identity she had to construct for herself. This happened only when the famous Dalit social activist and Ph.D. scholar Rohith Vamula committed suicide. As Yashica began to understand the inequities of the caste system, she also had to deal with the crushing guilt of denying her history and the struggles of her grandparents and the many Dalit reformers who fought for equal rights.

The author is successful in making anyone compassionate enough to tear up with its details of manual scavenging, Dalit student suicides, and Dalit women rapes. She talks about the mental stress that Dalits go through to hide their caste. It also talks about the abysmal representation of Dalits in academics, media, and law --- all of which are necessary to bring to light discrimination. The absence of Dalits in these professions finally leads to a singular

narrative dominated by higher castes who believe Dalits are either destitute or undeserving of reservation quota problems. As a result of its clarity, Dutt's book becomes a wonderful instrument to arm yourself with.

Author Yashica Dutt's journey into discovering herself and, accepting the myriad ways in which her identity and her caste are intertwined, is remarkable. Because as she starts learning about Dalits and, the insidious as well as explicit discrimination that Dalits are subjected to in all spheres of their lives, she nudges the reader to perceive the world from the prism of discrimination. This jolts us into coming to terms with the injustices that have been meted out to Dalits since time immemorial based on arbitrary notions of what constitutes an "upper caste" and who belongs to a "lower caste", and that continues to this day. There is absolutely no rational explanation behind the division of society into four Varna, except for the maintenance of the status quo by the ones who benefit from this segregation.

Dutt provides her readers with not just her personal story but also acquaints us with the history of caste-based discrimination and the Dalit movements. Therefore, for anyone seeking initiation into learning more about Casteism and how it afflicts a Dalit, and how opportunities that are made available to upper castes are, in one way or another, an outcome of their privilege, this memoir would be the best place to start. Sharmila Rege in her book writes: ...The writer wrote her account to record the making of history by Dalits and to make the young generation of Dalits realize the great deeds of Dr. Ambedkar so that they will not be ashamed of their history of struggle which they have to take forward. Some Dalit readers of Dalit autobiography question the relevance of highlighting the past life, which has been neglected by the community (Rege 21).

Seventy years of Independence and yet Dalit and its synonyms are cuss words in Hindi vocabulary (Bhangi being the most prominent one). It was a truly eye-opening experience about a form of injustice that needs urgent attention. Dutt covers very complex issues in this book while keeping easy to understand and follow Right from the activism of Phule and Savitribai to the concerted efforts of Dr. B R Ambedkar, and down to Rohith Vemula's activism and subsequent suicide. Dutt attempts to tell her readers that Casteism is an evil that needs to be eradicated, and for that, it must at first be acknowledged as an evil.

Result and Discussion

This paper analyses how finely caste exists among us and how it often goes unnoticed. And if someone just shrugged off their shoulders believing they are above caste --- this book is definitely for them. Being casteless is a privilege and is high time for upper-caste urban educated folks to acknowledge and accepted the same. As Dutt says, acknowledgment and acceptance will eventually lay the path for challenging the status quo. This paper argues how Dalit Women create their narratives about their atrocities and subvert other narratives to bring out Dalit women's empowerment, activism, and consciousness as an approach to social change. Apart from this, an exploration in this area may also help other marginalized groups to create potential through their narratives like biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs.

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