

A Study of Caste Dynamics and Identity Reclamation in Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit*

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Abstract

Indian Constitution establishes India as a Democratic state which guarantees equality, liberty, and justice for its citizens. However, lived realities of the twenty-first century starkly contrast with constitutional values. According to the reports of the National Crime Records Bureau, approximately fifty thousand cases of caste-based discrimination and atrocities are filed every year, which underscores the deep-rooted issue of caste system that adversely affects the lives of 200 million Dalit. Caste is a unique feature of Indian society and is structured on the concept of *Chaturvana* which demarcates individuals into the hierarchical order of Brahmin (Priest), Kshatriya (Warriors), Vaishya (Businessman), and Shudra (Labourer) by birth. Outside this social order remain the 'Asparashya', 'Antyaja', and 'Chandala' who are known as untouchables, considered inferior and impure beings and also forced to live a life of utter humiliation and exploitation under subjugation of Swarnas. However, this discriminatory and inhuman structure has been rigorously challenged by social reformers like Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar who advocated for an inclusive society founded on the principles of Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity. In this context, the present paper critically explores the dynamics of Caste in Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as a Dalit: A Memoir*, that challenges the hegemonic Brahminic discourse consisting of discriminatory practices and dogmatic beliefs. It will use the writings and speeches of Dr. Ambedkar, Phule, and Periyar as a theoretical framework to examine her lived experience of facing caste discrimination and the stigma of untouchability in the contemporary world. It will also shed light on her journey of reclaiming true Dalit self, serves as an act of self-assertion and resistance against the caste hierarchy and hegemony.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit, Brahminic discourse, Self-Assertion, Resistance, Identity.

Introduction

The term "Dalit" is derived from the Sanskrit word "Dal," which means broken, ground, crushed, and scattered. They are the most deprived and marginalized section of Indian society, who endured inhuman treatment and atrocities due to the caste system. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines Caste as "a system of rigid social stratification characterized by hereditary status, endogamy, and social barriers sanctioned by custom, law, or religion". Its traces go back to the Brahminic discourse of *Chaturvarna* that demarcated Indian society into four Varnas: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra by birth and each

varna is not equal by grade in status. Manu in 2 BC wrote the divine law book *Manusmriti* that defines the duties of each varna. It states that

A Brahmin could extract work from the Sudra paying or without paying. Brahma has created the Sudra only to work for the Brahmins. (8.V.413) and If a Sudra talks ill of a Brahmin his tongue should be cut off. (8.V.270) and They (Chandalas) must live outside the village; their property must be dogs and donkeys. Their clothes must be the garments of the dead, and they must be eaten from broken dishes. They should not walk about in villages and towns at night. (10.V.51)

Similarly, *Gautama Dharmasutra* in the twelfth chapter proclaims

Now if he (Shudra) listens intentionally to (a recitation of) the Veda, his ears shall be filled with (molten) tin or lac. If he recites (Vedic texts), his tongue shall be cut out. If he remembers them, his body shall be split in twain.

These law books sanctioned the divine status to the Brahmins and relegated Shudras and Ati-Shudras to the margins as inferior beings, thereby reinforcing a rigid hierarchical structure that perpetuated social inequality and justified discrimination based on birth. This hierarchical order forced the untouchable to live and work against their will and established the hegemony of Brahmins. The structure of caste is based on injustice and marginalization which is strongly challenged by social reformers Jyotiba Phule, Periyar, and Dr Ambedkar. Their efforts shape the constitutional reforms that installed the fundamental rights which give every citizen equal right and protected Dalits against exploitation. Dr. Ambedkar writes in his *Annihilation of Caste* “The Caste System is not merely a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour— it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. In no other country is the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers” (1:48). Caste does not only destroy equality but demolish sentiment of fraternity also among fellow beings. Like Dr, Ambedkar Periyar also questioned to the caste structure, in 1925, he started Self-Respect movement to remove the untouchability and restore a dignity of marginalized communities in the public sphere. In this context K. Veeramani writes about him in *Collected Works of Periyar*: “Periyar considered the caste system the cancer of the Indian society. To him, nothing was more important than putting an end to this abomination. He waged a relentless war against the caste system, especially against the practice of untouchability, and all its manifestations in the society” (36). Anti-caste movement marked the rise of Dalit consciousness, leading to the emergence of Dalit intelligentsia who can articulate their voice through literature is a testament to their pains and suffering. In 1972, Namdeo Dhasal and J V Pawar who started the Dalit Panther Movement were also good poets. They expressed their feelings of anger, cry and protest through the medium of poetry. Further writers such as Om Parkash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limbale, Babytai Kamble, Daya Pawar, Babura Bagul, and Bama used the genre of life narratives to express their emotions in the literature which gives windows to readers to understand Dalit pain and agony empathetically.

Yashica Dutt’s memoir *Coming Out as Dalit* published in 2019 explores her “Lived experience” of being a Dalit in contemporary times which negotiates with the social and psychological implications of caste. She was born in the Bhangi Caste which is considered the lowest in the social order. This caste has been doing the stigmatic work to manually clean the human excrete for ages that was imposed on them. She describes “My grandfather’s first wife worked as a manual scavenger, cleaning dry excrement from people’s homes”. When her grandfather was preparing for the civil service and after getting the job he turned towards to city with his family to live the life beyond stigma and humiliation. But they had to hide their last name to pass as upper caste;

When I was a child, it puzzled me that my father and grandfather didn't share their last name, unlike other father-son pairs in the neighbourhood. My grandfather had dropped Nidaniya—a typically 'Bhangi' last name—in his twenties, perhaps around the time he was forced down from the horse he was riding during his wedding procession at sword-point by caste Hindus in Jaipur (11).

It reveals that being Bhangi in society is abuse and you will be looked at with utter contempt and hatred. So, they choose to hide their identity to escape from public humiliation and torture. There is no provision for mobility in the caste Hindu society and the status of man is fixed by birth as Dr. Ambedkar explains in *Mooknayak*. The castes which constitute the so-called Hindu community are arranged in hierarchical order. Hindu society is like a tower, each floor of which is allotted to one caste. The point worth remembering is that this tower has no staircase and therefore there is no way of climbing up or down from one floor to another. The floor on which one is born is also the floor on which one dies. No matter how meritorious a person from a lower floor might be, there is no avenue for him to climb up to the upper floor. Likewise, there is no means by which a person entirely devoid of merit can be relegated to a floor beneath the one to which he has been assigned. Yashica tries to pretend herself as the high caste Brahmins which deepens her trauma with identity. She writes

I was born in a Dalit family in Ajmer, Rajasthan. And I grew up learning to hide it. My convent school education, a non-Dalit sounding last name, and a skin colour that was 'dusky but still not dirty' eased my passing as a non-Dalit. 'Beta, what caste are you from?' 'Aunty, Brahmin.' A lie I spoke so often and with such conviction, that I not only fooled my friends' mothers but even myself. But I couldn't fool the shame that spread across my face each time someone mentioned 'caste', 'reservation', 'bhangi'—the common slur, which loosely translates to a human scavenger and the name of my exact caste. 'This time, they'll find out', I had thought when the undergraduate college I attended tucked my name under the SC/ST quota or when I submitted my birth certificate for my first job at an ad agency. Some did find out, some didn't. Most didn't care. The ones who did (a friend, who along with her parents witnessed my first public admission of being 'low-caste' at 15) stopped being in touch. But I always cared. I cared enough to lie about my caste and to create elaborate backstories to protect that lie. I conveniently forgot the last name my grandfather dropped to allow him to pass, almost 60 years ago—Nidaniya (xii).

The historical baggage of caste is always intact with the present and future and plays a significant role in shaping her identity. It negatively impacts the minds and bodies of Dalits, fostering feelings of indignation and rejection in them towards their true identity. Her parents, much like their own parents, could not reveal their authentic self-identity to the world, as it remains largely unacceptable. To avoid public humiliation, they created a false consciousness of being part of a higher caste. They adopted the method of Sanskritization to elevate their status within the caste hierarchy. As defined by Srinivas, Sanskritization is "the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice-born' caste." This process traps a Dalit in an identity crisis, leading to anxiety, distress, and an inferiority complex. She recalls memories of how her family organized lavish parties to gain acceptance as a high caste. As she narrates

The biggest show of the year would often be my birthday party. Every year till I turned five, Mum baked elaborate cakes from scratch—her 2-kg rabbit cake and a three-tier witch's house from the Hansel and Gretel fairy-tale were remembered for many years—and prepared a feast for at least thirty guests. It was an occasion to declare our 'higher' class status and an attempt to camouflage our lower caste." (20)

Her family strictly imitates Brahminic cultural rituals to establish themselves as high-caste Hindus like her mother rigidly follows Vastu Shastra. She has the conception that upper-caste people are fairer than the Dalits. Dutt has “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)” Because she may be judged based on colour as high or low that further leads to a sense of anxiety and distress for her look. As

I was born a light-skinned child who grew up to be progressively darker, until my skin tone was the same as Mum’s. This became a constant source of anxiety for her. Before I was old enough to remember or protest, she started bathing me with ubtans ... Even if on some confused level I understood that I needed to be fair to be accepted, and not ‘Dalit-looking’, there was no way I could explain that to them. So I’d quickly and wordlessly scrub it off when someone noticed that I still had some of my ‘Dalitness’ sticking to me. While packing my luggage for the boarding school at Sophia, Mum had slipped in a bag of the dry powder I was supposed to mix with milk or water and use during my bath. (30)

In this way, caste has become the cause of anxiety and stress to her and it does not only affect her mind in the public space but also in her personal space. She was not aware of this stigma that her community was carrying the burden for the thousand years. Her childhood passed in this mental trauma. In her memoir, she describes

For the next two years in Mussoorie, I remained an ‘outstanding’ student, debating, quizzing and even, at nine, hosting important school functions. Yet, I never saw that as anything more than dumb luck or lack of competition. My understanding of caste was only half-formed at the time, but I knew there was a very real need to hide my caste. What I knew for sure was that no one expected a Dalit to be bright. So it wasn’t enough for me to be bright, I had to be the ‘brightest’ to convince them, and essentially myself, that I was their equal. When I wasn’t the best at everything I did—which was most of the time—I feared that everyone would easily see through the smoke and mirrors I was working so hard to hide behind (36).

All the time, she feels burdened by her caste identity which she cannot deny from the heart but she has no option despite hiding. However, she focuses hard on her studies, especially on her English-speaking skills. She speaks with a fluent accent so that nobody can judge her caste. Her mother emphasizes her studies. She got admitted to famous English medium schools like Sophia which later pushed her to take admission to St. Stephen for higher studies which helped her to overcome the internalized inferiority of being a Dalit. Passing herself a high caste and denying the real Dalit-self left a psychological scar that hinders self-actualization. Although she continued her studies, with the support of her family and friends, succeeded in taking a flight to America to study at Columbia University. It is the place where Dr. Ambedkar first completed his masters and on caste that offered space to his liberal ideas. There she starts reflecting upon her journey and starts writing essays on her identity “about my caste, about growing up Bhangi and learning to hide it. The shame I had carried around for twenty-seven years slowly started to vaporize with each click of the keyboard.” It helped her with the recovery of confidence and self-respect. Here she discloses her secret to her close friend Parul her identity as the words reflect the tension and anxiety and she feels like:

I was fifteen again, back in that moment when my friend’s parents had asked me about my caste. I was back in that school bus where my friend who had found out my caste was refusing to look my way. I was worried: what if Parul turned away too? Hesitantly, I told her I was from a lower caste. I still couldn’t

say the word ‘Bhangi’. ‘This is your big secret? You sounded like you had killed someone’. She called me crazy, laughing uncontrollably for a few minutes (132).

After breaking the hidden reality of her caste, the feelings of her friend towards her did not change before her and it helped her to overcome the anxiety and fear. In this context, Dr. Ambedkar appeals to the Dalits that they must believe in self-respect and self-help that will help them to live dignified lives.

Conclusion

To sum up, the present research paper critically explored the intricate caste dynamics portrayed in Yashica Dutt’s memoir *Coming Out as Dalit*, revealing the profound psychological and social impact of caste on the author’s self. The study delved into the internalised oppression Dutt experiences and her struggle with shame, invisibility, and the constant need to conceal her Dalit identity in order to assimilate into dominant social norms. However, she overcomes fear and trauma and reclaims her Dalit identity, which led to self-acceptance and empowerment and demystifies the notion of Sanskritization, that creates internal conflict and identity crisis in the lives of Dalits.

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