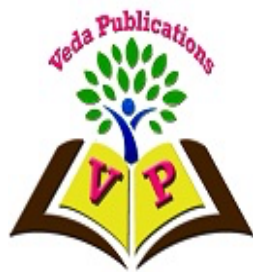




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE UNCLAIMED SELF: CASTE, SILENCE AND IDENTITY IN
YASHICA DUTT'S COMING OUT AS DALIT**

Rajan

*PhD Research Scholar, University of Delhi.*Email: Rajanlodhey74@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13203>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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This article examines caste silence and the strategic management of caste identity as defining features of the Dalit experience in contemporary India, with particular reference to Yashica Dutt's memoir *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019). Drawing on the sociological frameworks of Gopal Guru and Anand Teltumbde, and on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic concept of repression, the article argues that the practice of withholding caste identity in institutional spaces must be understood not as a personal choice but as a socially produced response to the specific conditions of post-liberalization India. In situations that claim to be merit-based and caste-blind, Dalits negotiate their way through institutional settings by carefully manipulating their caste identity in such a manner that it leads to intense psychological stress. Moreover, the essay shows that Dutt's autobiography is a powerful political statement that acknowledges the psychological stress involved while simultaneously reclaiming her Dalit identity. By foregrounding the significance of silence and identity management as crucial aspects of Dalit subjectivity in today's world, this paper adds to the growing scholarship on Dalit autobiographies by offering new perspectives on how caste operates in contexts where it is officially rejected yet persists. In doing so, it also highlights how memoir as a literary form becomes a site of resistance, enabling Dalit writers to reclaim subjectivity, challenge dominant narratives, and assert the political urgency of lived experience within academic discourse.

Keywords : *Caste silence, Dalit life writing, Yashica Dutt, Dalit subjectivity**Author(s) retain the copyright of this article*

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, since the beginning of economic liberalisation, an unusual social phenomenon has been observed in increasing urban and institutional contexts in India. Educated Dalits who managed to enter higher education institutions, join corporate offices, and work in the metropolitan social environment find themselves living in a world where caste discrimination is formally rejected, but where caste hierarchy is sustained by much more subtle and invisible means. As a response to such conditions, many Dalit individuals started adopting the practice of caste silence, the management of caste visibility in the institutional context, which entails significant social risks.

The theme of this essay will focus on this aspect and address the issue using the book *Coming Out as Dalit* by Yashica Dutt (2019). This life story is one of the most striking examples of Dalit life writing in English literature, and it is remarkable for its emphasis on the suppression of Dalit identity rather than the caste struggle or opposition. The author describes her experiences in studying at Lady Shri Ram College and working in the rich media context of Delhi, as well as her decision to announce her Dalit identity after the death of Rohit Vemula in 2016. The memoir thus traces both the experience of silence and that of assertion, making it an unusually rich text for analysing the dynamics this article seeks to examine.

The argument of this article proceeds in three stages. The first section situates the practice of managing caste visibility within the specific social conditions of post-liberalisation India, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Gopal Guru and Anand

Teltumbde to understand the political economy of silence in contemporary institutional contexts. The second section examines the psychological dimensions of sustained caste silence as they are registered in Dutt's narrative, drawing on Freud's concept of repression to theorise the inner life produced by the requirement to suppress a fundamental dimension of one's identity. The third section analyses Dutt's act of coming out as Dalit as a political and ethical act that responds to the conditions documented in the earlier sections. It considers the implications of this act for understanding the relationship between personal narrative and political assertion in contemporary Dalit life writing.

THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF CASTE SILENCE

Any analysis of the strategic management of caste identity in contemporary India must begin by understanding the specific social conditions that make this practice both possible and necessary. It is important to note that such a situation arises precisely because liberalisation has created spaces in which Dalit people are partially included in ways they were not before. It is in connection with this partial inclusion that the systematisation of silencing can be understood, since it is precisely because of this inclusion that caste silencing became so common.

Such a context makes Anand Teltumbde's analysis of the connection between liberal democracy and caste inequality more useful for comprehending this situation. Teltumbde argues that the Indian state has developed considerable capacity for absorbing Dalit political demands without dismantling the structural foundations of caste inequality. The formal mechanisms of constitutional democracy, the



abolition of untouchability, the guarantee of equal citizenship, and the reservation system have created channels through which individual Dalit claims can be processed and individual mobility achieved, without these developments constituting a genuine challenge to the overall structure of caste power. The consequence, in Teltumbde's analysis, is a social world in which formal equality coexists with structural inequality, and in which the articulation of caste as a continuing structure of power is treated as excessive or disruptive.

This political context has direct consequences for the social regulation of caste speech in institutional settings. In environments that define themselves as meritocratic and caste-neutral, naming caste as a continuing reality is experienced by dominant-caste members as an accusation, suggesting that the institution's claims to neutrality are dishonest. The social discomfort produced by caste speech in such contexts is real and consequential. It introduces distance, defensiveness, and, at times, more active forms of social sanction. For Dalit individuals who are already in socially precarious positions within these institutions, these consequences are not trivial. The social motivations behind silence on caste are thus not purely psychological, but also structural, shaped by the social organisation of institutional spaces that reward the performance of caste neutrality and punish the expression of Dalit identity.

Humiliation, as Gopal Guru demonstrates, provides another theoretical lens for understanding the production of caste silence. According to Guru, humiliation not only refers to the occasional act of humiliation but also constitutes the structure of caste society itself, as a result of the manner in which

everyday social relations construct Dalits as figures of suspicion, condescension, or deficiency. Structural humiliation occurs through a series of countless small encounters in which one is ignored, questioned about one's abilities, or otherwise made to feel inferior, resulting in an eroding sense of self-respect. In this light, the decision to be silent takes on a different dimension: a rational response to the anticipated experience of structural humiliation.

The social conditions described above have been captured with great precision in Dutt's memoir. In particular, she captures how the media elite in Delhi, represented by English-language journalism and literary festivals, positioned themselves as a world that was progressive and cosmopolitan, yet still very much informed by the unspoken codes of dominant-caste society. In this world, caste was not openly discussed. However, its presence was felt in the social networks that opened or closed professional doors, in the cultural references that signaled belonging, and in the subtle social dynamics that made certain kinds of people feel entirely at home while others were perpetually performing an ease they did not quite feel. Dutt's account of navigating this world offers an unusually articulate and self-aware documentation of how caste silence is produced and maintained in contemporary institutional contexts. As she writes, "I wanted to be like my colleagues who were not hiding, not scared, not Bhangi, and therefore better than me" (Dutt), a statement that captures both the internalised shame produced by caste stigma and the impossible desire to escape one's own identity.



THE DALIT PSYCHE: SILENCE AND ITS INNER COSTS

Social situations mentioned in the previous section produce not only specific social mechanisms for regulating one's caste identity but also specific psychological states among those who practice them. This section will examine the psychological aspects of the continuous suppression of caste identity as described by Dutt. It will show that such continuous suppression leads to the emergence of a distinct inner world characterised by anticipatory anxiety, hyper-vigilance towards oneself, and inner fragmentation. Sigmund Freud's concept of repression offers a starting point for explaining this particular psychological problem. According to Freud, repression is the act of keeping anything dangerous to the self away from conscious consideration. It is not to say that repression has no effect; indeed, it remains very powerful in the unconscious level of the self. The application of this theory to a social act, such as hiding one's caste, is because it falls under the category of excluding a part of oneself, which cannot be put into words. However, it is very much alive within one's mind. It leads to a kind of inner dichotomy: the gap between the inner experience of caste identity, which comprises memories and trauma on one side, and the outer performance in institutions on the other.

It must be emphasised that this invocation of Freud is not about making the caste-based oppression psychological and hence an individual matter. The psychological state resulting from carefully manipulated caste identity is socially constructed. It arises out of the structural socio-economic pressure, which forces Dalits to disown

their caste identity in situations that claim to be caste neutral, not because of any personal flaw on the part of individuals. This is where Dutt's work becomes significant through her constant focus on the very inner feelings mentioned. Throughout her professional experience, she speaks about the process of constantly calculating how much one could express in terms of one's caste identity. Further, there is careful handling around any mention of one's family and background. What follows is exhaustion from the whole process of maintaining an outer social personality that differs from one's inner identity. This, of course, is the description of a psychological condition, which we can call 'anticipatory anxiety'. Unlike the regular anxiety associated with immediate danger, this is the state of constant vigilance when anything and everything can lead to one's exposure at any point. As Dutt herself articulates it, "Hiding one aspect of your identity is like leading a double life. You do not feel like you belong anywhere" (Dutt), it articulates the existential price paid for long-term denial of one's identity.

This sense of anticipatory anxiety stems directly from the practice of self-monitoring as described by Dutt. In a society that demanded her denial of her caste identity, she developed the habit of looking at herself as if through the eyes of an observer, evaluating how she was seen and whether any changes were required in how she presented herself. This constant practice of self-monitoring thus became a continuous process operating beneath the surface of ordinary social interaction, turning the spontaneous into the calculated and the comfortable into the tense. One of the central themes of this book is the price to be paid for the continuous self-



monitoring, and much of the emotional charge of the story comes from it.

While passing may bring about a certain reprieve from the social consequences of caste revelation, it also produces its own anxiety: the anxiety of knowing that one's social status and connections depend on maintaining the invisibility of one's caste identity. Dutt's account of the years she spent passing in Delhi's media world conveys both the relief that passing made possible and the particular strain of living with the knowledge that it was always provisional.

Moreover, the memoir also illustrates the connection between the silencing of the caste identity and the experience of shame. The feeling of shame, as a social emotion, serves to regulate social inclusion. It occurs when an individual feels like he or she fails to meet the criteria for membership in the relevant social group. Since the institutions of the dominant castes tend to operate under the assumption that caste identity does not matter, having such an identity brings shame. However, this feeling of shame conflicts with the ideology of the Ambedkarite tradition that seeks to turn the shame into pride and makes the Dalits proud of their identity.

COMING OUT: ASSERTION AS POLITICAL AND ETHICAL ACT

The central narrative movement of *Coming Out* as Dalit is from silence to assertion, from the sustained management of caste invisibility to the public claiming of Dalit identity that Dutt performs when she writes about her caste background for the first time in 2016. This section analyses this movement of

assertion as a political and ethical act that responds to and challenges the social conditions documented in the earlier sections.

The timing of Dutt's coming out is significant. She describes her decision to write publicly about her Dalit identity as directly precipitated by the death of Rohith Vemula, the Dalit research scholar whose institutional exclusion at the University of Hyderabad led to his suicide in January 2016. Vemula's death produced a moment of intense public attention to caste discrimination in Indian educational institutions, and it catalysed a broader movement of Dalit assertion in which individuals across India, many of them educated and professionally mobile, publicly claimed their Dalit identities in an act of solidarity and political statement. Dutt's coming out belongs to this broader political moment, and her memoir can be understood in part as an attempt to theorise and document the conditions that make such moments of collective assertion both necessary and difficult.

From the perspective of Gopal Guru's ethical framework, Dutt's act of coming out can be understood as an ethical demand, a refusal to accept the terms of a social arrangement that offers conditional inclusion at the cost of self-erasure. For Guru, genuine dignity is not only about maintaining self-respect in difficult situations but also about being seen as human by others. The idea of having the option to dress up to disguise oneself is another way to avoid embarrassment. However, it is also an attempt to reject an important aspect of oneself. Thus, revealing oneself becomes not just a moral statement but a personal choice to reject this contract of conditional acceptance.



There is no doubt that the political implications of this personal choice should not go unnoticed. According to Dutt's autobiography, she is part of the new trend in Dalit literature characterised by reflective and mediated modes of political expression rather than merely insisting on visibility within conditions of exclusion. In describing how hard it is to maintain caste invisibility in this way, Dutt creates much more than a simple story. It theorises the social conditions that produce silence as a systematic practice and, in doing so, makes these conditions available for political critique. The memoir itself is an act of caste speech in a context that discourages caste speech, and its very existence challenges the social arrangements that make silence necessary.

The use of the English language in Dutt's memoir is also politically significant. Writing in English, the language of elite Indian institutional culture, Dutt addresses herself both to the dominant-caste readers who inhabit the social world she describes and to Dalit readers who may recognise in her account their own experiences of managing caste identity. This dual address is one of the distinctive features of contemporary Dalit life writing in English. It reflects the complex social position of educated, professionally mobile Dalit writers who inhabit multiple social worlds simultaneously. By writing in English about experiences that dominant-caste readers may prefer not to acknowledge, Dutt performs an act of political disruption within the very language of institutional belonging.

The act of coming out also carries risks that the memoir acknowledges. The act of making one's caste identity public could expose one to other forms of scrutiny, contempt, and repositioning in society. Dutt

explains that she faced both acceptance and rejection following the disclosure of her caste identity and is aware that her professional identity could be subsumed under her caste identity in the same way that her previous secrecy sought to prevent it. However, in this case, the threat is deemed acceptable in exchange for achieving the objective of reclaiming true identity. This is why the coming out process is not only about liberation but also an arduous struggle between the benefits and dangers that come with making the experience of caste public.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the strategic management of caste identity is a central and structurally significant characteristic of Dalit experience in contemporary urban India, not a marginal or incidental practice, but a systematic response to the specific social conditions of post-liberalisation Indian society. Through the reading of Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit*, this paper traces the social production of caste silence in institutional contexts, the psychological costs of the sustained suppression of caste identity for Dalit subjectivity, and the political and ethical significance of the act of public assertion that Dutt's memoir both narrates and performs.

Dutt's memoir is relevant for more than just a chronicle of one person's life. It makes a theoretical contribution to our understanding of how caste works in contemporary India, not in terms of the overt mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion that earlier scholarship has elaborated in great detail, but through the more subtle mechanisms of social regulation that make caste invisibility the condition



of institutional belonging. Dutt's memoir makes these processes visible and narrates the psychological consequences that they impose. It questions the societal structures that promote the demand for quiet, as well as the scholarly frameworks that have not fully theorised this phenomenon.

These conclusions are significant for Dalit life writing as a field of study. While this article posits that management of caste identity is central to the lives of present-day Dalits, it follows that any attempt at studying these experiences would have to be based on critical approaches that can read between the lines, taking into account the absence of certain things as well as their presence in the formation of the Dalit narrative. This is precisely one of the most important steps in the evolution of the field of Dalit literature, and Dutt's memoir offers an incredibly insightful point of departure for such analysis. The concept of the unclaimed self, the part of identity that institutional cultures do not claim while simultaneously affecting all aspects of human life, can be used as an extremely promising theoretical tool when trying to understand both this particular memoir and the issue of caste in contemporary India in general.

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