

A Feminist Reading of *Coming Out as Dalit* by Yashica Dutt

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Abstract

Dalit feminist writers in the 21st century aim to expose issues like violence, abuse, sexual harassment and the injustice faced by Dalit women. Dalit women face constant threats of physical assault and sexual violence. Dalit women writers critique male dominance within their communities and challenge mainstream feminism for overlooking caste-based discrimination. These writers advocate for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges the specific experiences of Dalit women. Through literature, these voices advocate for legal reform, solidarity and the recognition of Dalit women's rights as essential to achieving gender social justice. In contrast to mainstream feminist literature that mainly focuses on Dalit women's writing highlights the layered discrimination and gender inequality caused by the caste system. In *Coming Out as Dalit*, Yashica Dutt explores violence from both psychological and social standpoints. Dutt critiques upper-caste feminism for neglecting the caste-based oppression of Dalit women, whose oppression is compounded by caste-based discrimination, patriarchy and economic exploitation. This paper will examine Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* to analyse the multifaceted violence faced by Dalit women.

Keywords:

Caste; Gender; Identity; Dalit Literature; Dalit Feminism

Introduction

Dalit women, at the lowest of the caste hierarchy, face significant socio-economic vulnerability. They face discrimination based on caste and gender, leading to serious social and economic challenges. Dalit literature highlights the unique struggles of Dalit women compared to non-Dalit women. Immediate action from the Indian government is needed to create and implement policies that tackle the specific issues. The ongoing violence and exploitation, including forced prostitution, must be stopped urgently. During the 1970s, the Dalit Panther movement brought attention to a number of prominent Dalit women authors whose autobiographies shed light on their struggles with both patriarchy and caste oppression. While Dalit feminism is still emerging as a feminist theory, it addresses the gaps left by mainstream feminism and Ambedkarite activism, both of which often neglect caste and gender issues.

Yashica Dutt, born into a Dalit family in Rajasthan in 1986, spent her youthful years in New Delhi before moving to the U.S. for further studies. Her book, *Coming Out as Dalit*, combines her own story with those shared on the platform. This paper applies Dalit feminism by focusing on the challenges faced by marginalized Dalit women. Dutt adeptly delves into intricate subjects in a comprehensible manner, including the advocacy of Phule and Savitribai, the endeavours of Baba Saheb Ambedkar, and the activism and unfortunate demise of Rohith Vemula. It examines how Dalit women tell their own stories of oppression.

Movement for Dalit Women

Dalit feminism talks about the struggles and contributions of Dalit women in social and cultural life. It demands equal rights and fair treatment for Dalit women in society. The oppression of Dalit women emerged from patriarchy and caste system, which keep them in a lower position in society. It's important to acknowledge the vital role played by Dalit women to Baba Saheb Ambedkar's movement. He emphasized that true liberation requires women's emancipation. Their activism was sparked by the Mahad Satyagraha, where Baba Saheb's inspiring speech fueled a revolutionary spirit

among them. Dalit women actively took part in the reform movements, and they also participated in All India Depressed Classes Women's Conferences to raise their voice at a large scale. This led to the formation of women's organizations throughout the region, where they actively participated in discussions.

The Dalit Panther Movement presented a strong alternative to the Republican Party of India's weak leadership and the movement's aggressive nature led to fewer women participating. This shift suggests that the focus on male-led activism pushed Dalit women's voices aside. Despite this, the movement continued to tackle the problems faced by Dalit women. The Movement tackled problems such as assault, rape, and violence against women, but did not promote Dalit women to leadership or political roles. In literature, Dalit men overshadowed the contributions of Dalit women. After pivotal issues like the Namantar Movement and the land rights movement, the participation of Dalit women declined, highlighting the necessity for dedicated platforms for their specific issues. Dalit women's groups formed in 1990 throughout India, signifying a powerful assertion of their identity. Dalit feminists began to question mainstream feminism, who ignored the specific problems faced by Dalit women. They also criticized the rigid class structure and also pointed out male dominance within Dalit movements and challenged the authority of men.

Dalit Literature is deeply influenced by Baba Saheb Ambedkar, whose ideas and activism helped shape its growth. Babasaheb Ambedkar described education as a powerful tool to fight poverty, everyday hardships and social discrimination. Dalit Feminism seeks to highlight the specific identity and representation of Dalit women, rejecting the general categorization that often represents only upper-caste women. Dalit Feminism also addresses upper-caste standards of 'beauty,' 'morality' and 'virtue' on Dalit women, highlighting the caste system's role on both family and societal patriarchy. Gail Omvedt argues that

Violence against Dalit women in public and workplace settings exemplifies social patriarchy, as Dalit men, marginalized themselves, frequently lack the means to shield them from upper-caste violence. This situation underscores the pervasive caste and gender-based oppression in Indian society (Omvedt).

Yashica Dutt discusses her journey of accepting her identity, and issues such as limited educational access, media underrepresentation and the need for reservations.

Theoretical Framework

Dutt's work combines intersectionality, Ambedkar's caste theory, feminist theory and critical social theory. Intersectionality explores how caste and gender intersect, uniquely oppressing Dalit women. Ambedkar's caste theory critiques the caste system and "varna" hierarchy, calling for social reform. The study claims that Dalit Feminist theory focuses on the struggles of Dalit women, addressing their caste-based oppression. There is a need to evaluate Dalit women's historical experiences based on gender and patriarchy. These theoretical perspectives converge in Dutt's memoir to explore the psychological, social and political impacts of caste, using personal narrative to connect individual experience with broader social injustices.

Dalit feminism

Feminism in Dalit literature focuses on how caste and gender issues overlap, giving Dalit women a platform to share their experiences. It highlights their struggles with both caste discrimination and gender inequality. In the early phase of Dalit feminism writers and activists such as Baby Kamble, Bama, Urmila Pawar, Gopal Guru and Shantabai Kamble played important roles. They spoke about the double marginalization faced by Dalit women both as a member of lower caste and as women in patriarchal society. In contemporary times, writers like Meena Kandasamy, Gogu Shyamala, Yashica Dutt, Sujatha Gidla, and Sharmila Rege, carried forward this legacy to write about caste, class, gender, resistance, identity and social injustice. The experience of humiliation creates its own "structures of subjectivity" (Kumar 166) and leads to specific reactions and responses.

Dutt provides a distinct structural and linguistic approach compared to more generalized Dalit and Indian women's writing, focusing on a nuanced representation of their social experiences in literature. Yashica Dutt candidly condemns her father's abusive behaviour. Dalit women often face limitations on their choice of spouse, due to economic factors. As Dutt recounts her mother was upset when she discovered her husband's "fondness for alcohol" during the engagement (Dutt 5). Furthermore, she

illustrates her family's emphasis on the attainment of fair skin and proficiency in English, both viewed as crucial markers of social mobility within the Indian context. Dutt's mother resorted to skin-lightening treatments, including ubtan, to mask any physical indicators associated with their caste status. Dutt argues "I was also leaving the safety net of my family's upper-caste performance" (26).

Dutt discusses the deep problem of colour bias in Indian society. For example, the haldi ceremony in Hindu weddings is meant to give the bride a "glow", which often indirectly means making her look fairer. This obsession with fair skin is also visible in popular culture. The Netflix series *Indian Matchmaking* reflects society's preference for fair-skinned brides and grooms. In her review Ishita Tiwari notes that the show promotes caste and gender hierarchies and repeatedly highlights the importance of "fair skin" in choosing a partner (Tiwari 1). Stacy Ghansah also argues in her article on colourism that the series reveals how casually fairness is mentioned as desirable quality. She also criticizes social media filters for digitally lightening skin tones and promotes colour bias (Ghansah 9).

By turning their personal and conceptual spaces into platforms for radical politics and identity, Dutt emerges as an engaged and thoughtful subject, though at varying rates and from different perspectives. She cautions against merely reinforcing stereotypes or romanticizing suffering, instead aiming to navigate the space between pain and freedom with a nuanced approach. Thus, their portrayals of daily struggles are deeply intertwined with a political agenda for liberation. Based on her perspective, the emerging Dalit women are not depending on conventional press and broadcast media to establish their historical significance (Dutt 167). Although some engage in protests, others focus on organizing events and some prefer writing, "many of us don't. Our daily lives attending school, working and achieving -success-we challenge the caste system (181). Dutt's book, though it centers on her own story, also tracks the experiences of many Dalit women.

Dalit feminist writing highlights the violence Dalit women face and underscores the intersections of caste and gender. Gopal Guru notes that "Dalit men are replicating the same mechanisms used by high-caste adversaries to dominate them" (Guru). Guru also highlights the need to support Dalit women's right to assert their distinct experiences.

Violence and Caste-Discrimination Against Dalit Women

Dutt examines the domestic, sexual and psychological violence faced by Dalit women, highlighting their vulnerability is heightened by intersections of caste and gender. She stresses the systemic nature of this violence and advocates for social and institutional reforms, drawing her own experiences to promote awareness and justice for these women. Her mother, Shashi's character reflects the struggles faced by contemporary mothers managing various responsibilities, directly confronting unrealistic societal expectations of marriage and motherhood. Research scholar Amrita Nandy in her research article titled, "Outliers of Motherhood: Incomplete Women or Fuller Humans?" argues that to comprehend how these practices become normalized in women's lives, we must historicize motherhood and examine its evolving roles and perceptions. Shashi initially aimed to continue her education but soon realized that patriarchy relegated her to the roles of a perfect wife and mother. The expectation of being a perfect wife and mother derailed Shashi's vision of becoming an IPS officer. Despite knowing her father arranged her early marriage, she accepted it quietly. Shashi's struggle with identity while focusing on her children's needs highlights the profound effects of patriarchy and poverty on Dalit women's life.

Women's sexuality is tightly controlled to maintain family and community honor, intensifying their humiliation. Consequently, Dalit women are denied security in both private and public spheres, with their identity shaped by this conflation. Dutt calls this "disgusting misogyny" (59), where educating girls is viewed as a "stubborn and wasteful expense" (34) and outspoken women are condemned (6). Economic and social progress further entrenches "Brahminical patriarchy" (8). Rege examines how power dynamics related to class, caste and ethnicity shape societal groups, impacting Dalit women. She argues that both Savarna and Dalit masculinist movements overlook the structural oppression faced by Dalit women. Babasaheb championed women's empowerment by introducing family planning in the legislative assembly to free women from conservative constraints. He urged women to join movements like Satyagrahas and Dalit women's organizations.

Dutt highlights how Dalit women face triple marginalization from their gender, caste and class. She underscores the economic exploitation and undervaluation of their

labor, which exacerbates their hardships. Upper-caste men often see themselves as entitled to control Dalit women's sexuality, a belief reinforced by structural and societal forces. Dutt highlights the harsh realities faced by Dalits, including manual scavenging, student suicides and violence against Dalit women. She shows how hiding one's caste and poor representation in education and media reinforce negative views of Dalits. Dutt notes that the sexual violence against Dalit women remains "shockingly normal," a harsh truth they frequently endure in their daily lives (143). This shows that violence is deeply connected to the representation of Dalit women, intertwined with their gender and caste. Dutt mentions, "I talk of the lives of a varied group of Dalits" (Dutt ix). The book is valuable for diverse voices and experiences as noted by Sharmila Rege:

The author recorded their story to document the history made by Dalits and to inspire the younger generation to appreciate Dr. Ambedkar's significant contributions, urging them not to feel ashamed of their history of struggle, but to carry it forward. She also observes that some Dalit readers of Dalit autobiographies question the focus on past experiences, which have often been ignored by the community (Rege 21).

Gopal Guru, in "Dalit Women Talk Differently," argues that rape should be viewed in the context of caste and class stratification, not just as a criminal act. He argues that the caste factor significantly intensifies sexual violence against Dalit and tribal women due to their marginalized status within the existing caste-based power structure. He emphasizes that these women are more vulnerable and deprived, highlighting the stark socio-economic inequalities between upper and lower castes, which leave them with fewer resources to address sexual harassment and exploitation (Guru 2548). Dutt exposes police brutality against women in Bastar and Haryana, documenting their suffering to confront social injustice and sexual violence. She references a report in which Dalit women reported instances of policemen squeezing their breasts to determine if they were lactating (Dutt 144). Many cases of abuse are not reported because of shame, fear and lack of support. In this context, Vibhuti Patel states in her article "Campaign Against Rape by Women's Movement in India" that the need for gender sensitization within state institutions, especially the police. She argues that the government must properly implement laws and ensure accountability so that women feel safe and supported when they report violence.

The combined impact of caste and gender discrimination affects Dalit women in many serious ways. It does not only result in social and physical oppression but also creates deep psychological stress. Because they face everyday humiliation, bias, and stigma, many Dalit women suffer from strong emotional pain. This often appears in the form of anxiety, sadness, anger, helplessness, and even depression (Pal 2015).

Challenging Norms, Social Realism and Awareness

Dalit women's literature plays an important role in education by sharing stories about Dalit history, culture and social challenges. It helps raise awareness and build empathy. However, tribal women often face difficulties accessing good education due to remote locations, poor infrastructure and cultural barriers. Healthcare is also unequal, with limited services in their areas, which affects their health. Dutt also explains that Dalit women suffer both social and economic exploitation. Economic challenges include fewer job opportunities, unequal pay and lack of access to resources. She argues that Dalit women are often denied fair wages. Many are paid not in money but in leftover food or old clothes. Some earn as little as Rs. 10 to Rs 50 per house, while Dalit men doing sanitation work may earn up to Rs. 300 per day (Dutt 42). This comparison shows that Dalit women's labour is undervalued by our society. In addition to low pay, Dalit women also face sexual harassment from contractors, supervisors and other male workers.

Tribal women struggle to secure land and resources, often facing unfair distribution and dispossession. They are also marginalized by cultural practices that limit their decision-making and reinforce traditional gender roles. Violence and discrimination against them are common, worsened by weak legal protection and social vulnerabilities (Datar 172-179). Dalit women contribute to many forms of literature, such as novels, poetry, essays and autobiographies. Yashica Dutt employs social realism to expose the harsh realities of caste discrimination, especially its impact on Dalit women. Through her memoir, Dutt brings to light issues like manual scavenging, social exclusion and restricted access to education, drawing attention to the psychological toll of concealing one's caste and the lack of Dalit representation in professional fields such as

media and academia. Dutt's memoir critiques dominant caste narratives and highlights the strength of Dalit women.

Dutt shares how education and media shaped her views on caste. She points out that while education opened doors, it also exposed biases that she addressed in her work. As Babasaheb Ambedkar once said, the progress of a community is measured by the advancement of its women. He emphasized that unity and education are meaningless without women's involvement. Education is fruitless without the educated women and agitation is incomplete without the strength of women. The society needs to rethink and reexamine Babasaheb Ambedkar's insights to understand the true reality of Dalit women in society.

The Influence of Social Media on Dalit Lives

For Dalit writers, social media has become a powerful tool for building solidarity and organising collective action against caste oppression. Through social media, Dalit activists connect with one another, share experiences and support campaigns that challenge caste-based discrimination and violence. Dutt effectively uses social media to connect with a worldwide audience and marketing her art. In her memoir, she remarks that "caste may not always be visible, but it is always there like a ghost that's felt even when it's hidden"(Dutt 45). The #DalitLivesMatter movement was actively amplified by Yashica Dutt, which gained visibility on social media in response to incidents of caste violence in India. Dutt used her platform to spread awareness and encourage unity.

In one of her posts, Dutt emphasized the importance of collective strength by stating, "When we speak together, our voices are stronger. #DalitLivesMatter stands for justice and equality, going beyond a mere hashtag" (@YashicaDutt). This idea reflects the argument of Barbara Harlow, who argues that resistance becomes more effective when oppressed communities participate actively and collectively. In her seminal work *Resistance Literature* (1987), Harlow suggested that literature plays a proactive role in challenging societal norms rather than just reflecting them. According to Harlow, "Resistance literature emerges from political oppression and seeks to subvert systems of dominance by reclaiming the narrative power that is often wielded to justify inequality" (Harlow 31). Dutt's memoir aligns with Harlow's notion that resistance literature serves to "reveal and disrupt the hidden mechanisms of oppression" (Harlow 36). In her tweet, Dutt wrote, "Telling our stories is not just about healing: it's about fighting back. It's

about ensuring that the next generation doesn't have to carry the same burden of silence" (@YashicaDutt).

In her essay "Dalit Resistance in Digital Spaces: A Critical Examination" published in *Feminist Media Studies* (2021), Swati Parashar also examines that Dalit writers use social media and digital platforms to challenge negative images created by mainstream media. She explains that online spaces give Dalit writers an opportunity to present their own stories and perspectives. She also argues that social media helps Dalit writers move beyond the image of Dalits as helpless victims. Instead, they present themselves as strong, active and assertive individuals. As she notes, these counter-narratives reshape Dalit identity around "ideas of agency, resilience and resistance" (Parashar 91).

Along with her important role in Dalit literature, Dutt is also known for her work as a digital activist. Dutt uses social media to raise awareness about social injustice and to amplify the voice of marginalized communities who are often ignored from mainstream discussion.

Conclusions

Dutt's memoir blends personal experiences offering a feminist perspective that underscores the unique challenges. From a 21st-century Dalit feminist viewpoint, the study examines how the caste system and gender discrimination intersect, urging the recognition of privilege and the use of personal narratives to challenge these injustices. It encourages other marginalized groups to leverage their stories to promote social change and advance contemporary feminist and social justice goals. This new Dalit woman rejects imposed identities, challenges degrading ideologies and reinterprets caste, seeing it not just as a traditional social hierarchy but as a modern manifestation of inequality and power dynamics.

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