

Legible Bodies, Unreadable Wounds: The Semiotics of Caste Concealment and the Grammar of Disclosure in Yashika Dutt's Coming Out as Dalit

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Abstract

This research article examines Yashika Dutt's autobiography *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) from the three perspectives of semiotics, social performance and Dalit feminist epistemology. The research article argues that caste concealment is a planned, socially imposed language of survival. Drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, Erwin Goffman's social performance theory and B.R. Ambedkar's caste abolitionist philosophy, we seek to read Dutt's writings within a broader interpretive semiotic tradition. The research article establishes caste 'passing' as a compulsory performance and 'coming out' as a political semiotic act.

Keywords: Semiotics, Caste Obscurity, Dalit Autobiography, Social Performance, Declarative Grammar

1. Introduction

Literature is an archaeological excavation of experiences. Yashika Dutt's autobiography *Coming Out as Dalit* is the result of such an archaeological excavation. She documents with exquisite sensitivity the inner pain of many years of hiding her Dalit identity in it. However, this concealment is not just a personal choice, and it is a compulsory performance created by the Indian caste system. Researchers usually approach this work only from the perspective of biographical literature or as a testimony to caste oppression. This article takes a new path: it seeks to understand caste concealment as a semiotic system. The main purpose of this article is to establish that concealment is a deeply constructed, socially determined way of life.

2. Semiotic Theory and Caste Concealment

Roland Barthes argued in his *Mythologies* (1957) that signs carry meanings and structures of social power. A sign is the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In the context of Dalit concealment, the body becomes the most fundamental signifier and the revealing or concealing of caste is all a function of the body's symbolic functions. Erving Goffman, in his *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), argues that people who manage a spoiled identity exercise a permanent 'information control'. Yashika Dutt's life is a living testament to this theory. She changed her surname, adopting an identity that does not specify caste. These are all manifestations of what Goffman calls the process of 'passing'. Here it is useful to connect the theme of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). The title of Yashika Dutt's work suggests that the phenomenon of 'coming out' involves not only queer identity but also caste identity. It is striking that the same grammar applies to both different types of concealment.

3. The Semiotics of Disguise: Body, Name, Home

In Yashika Dutt's autobiography, disguise occurs in three key symbolic spaces: body, name, and domestic space. These three intertwine to form a complete symbolic network that conceals caste. First, the body functions as a sharp semiotic arena of caste. Stance, dress, eating habits, appearance and all of these become symbols that reveal or conceal caste. Yashika Dutt's family adopted upper-caste language, food, and rituals. This could be called semiotic camouflage. Second, the name is a very subtle symbolic weapon. In India, names often directly reveal caste. The altered family name 'Dutt' creates a casteless, middle-class identity. This is not just an individual choice, and the important insight is that the caste system forces people to disguise themselves in this way. Third, the domestic space such as the kitchen, the food habits, the festival celebrations, are all symbolic environments that conceal or reveal caste identity. Every ritual, every type of food in Yashika Dutt's home was part of this

semiotic management. Some passages in Yashika Dutt's memoir vividly reveal the psychological burden of concealing caste. Early in the book, she writes, describing the steps her family took to conceal their caste: "*We had to be always on guard. Passing was not a choice; it was a survival strategy.*" (Dutt, 2019, p. 14) These lines directly speak to Goffman's theory of 'passing'. Dutt makes it clear that concealment is not a choice, but it is a necessity. The expression 'on guard' here refers to perpetual surveillance. This describes Goffman's 'stigma management' as a lived experience. Further, at a crucial point in the book, Yashika Dutt describes revealing her identity as follows: "*Claiming my Dalit identity felt like stepping out of a costume I had worn for years — the relief was immense, but so was the terror.*" (Dutt, 2019, p. 203) The metaphor of 'costume' has a profound symbolic significance here. In Goffman's dramaturgical theory, all social activities are theatrical performances. Yashika Dutt's description of this veil as a costume, the relief and horror that come with removing it, perfectly captures the dual nature of caste veiling.

The Grammar of Disclosure: From Concealment to Testimony

The event of 'coming out' in Dutt's book should not be read as a mere personal act of heroism. It is a political act, a voice with a social grammar. The publication of the book itself is a semiotic act: from silence to speech, from concealment to revelation, from shame to dignity. This journey can be described as 'from shame to heroism'. In Ambedkar's thought, accepting Dalit identity is not just a personal decision and it is a political act that confronts the caste system. Yashika Dutt's 'coming out' embodies this Ambedkarian political activism. Her public acceptance of her Dalit identity is a sharp rejection of the caste-imposed shame. In her research on the 'respectability' of Dalit women, Shailaja Paik explains how Dalit women use upper-caste dignity as a weapon of protection. Yashika Dutt's case illustrates this too but at the end of the book she rejects that imposed dignity and claims the dignity of her own Dalit identity.

Queer Theory and Caste Concealment: A Comparative Perspective

This is the most innovative part of this study. Comparing queer theory and Dalit identity concealment may seem like a controversial construct. There is a subtle difference between queer identity and Dalit identity that must be carefully observed for the fundamental clarity. Rather, it suggests that a common 'grammar of concealment' operates in both types of identity concealment. In Sedgwick's theory of the 'closet', Concealment is not a personal preferential spirit but the collective socio-psychic spirit of the oppressed. Yashika Dutt's caste concealment is like that: a socially enforced concealment, not a voluntary concealment. Through the title 'Coming out', Dutt acknowledges this common grammar and redefines that grammar in the context of Dalit politics.

The Labour of Passing: Psychological and Physical Costs

There is a strong psychological force that takes its roots in the collective tragic loss of the oppressed section of the society behind caste passing, which deceptively seems to be just like a practice. Dutt describes the labour of passing, which involves living every moment in disguise. This labour of 'passing' involves managing dissonant memories, controlling language, carefully managing body language, and diverting conversations about caste. All of this creates a permanent psychological burden. This burden is often expressed in Dutt's work in the word 'shame'. In Ambedkar's words, caste is not just a division of labour, and it is a 'division of labourers', a system that classifies people in their very existence. Yashika Dutt's labour of passing is the physical manifestation of this division.

From Shame to Testimony: A Dalit Feminist Perspective

In Dalit feminist thought, 'testimony' is understood as a political intervention, rather than a personal experience. Yashika Dutt's book is a testimonial event that brings Dalit women lived experiences into the public domain. As Smitha Rege and other Dalit feminist scholars have pointed out, Dalit women's autobiographies are collective testimonies against the violence of caste. Yashika Dutt's writings stand as a milestone in this tradition. Furthermore, when viewed from a Dalit feminist perspective, the phenomenon of 'coming out' is seen as a double entendre: on the one hand, the oppression of caste, and on the other, the social expectations of women. Yashika Dutt confronts both simultaneously and asserts her voice in both.

Yashika Dutt's 'coming out' was a digital phenomenon. In 2016, her essay 'I'm a Dalit.

How Long Do I Have to Hide It?' on her social media account went viral. This is a unique feature of digital semiotics: a single disclosure spoke to millions of identities simultaneously.

Digital space acts as a new semiotic arena. In traditional society, caste concealment occurred on a physical scale in homes, streets, and social gatherings. But in the digital space, identity is constructed differently. Yashika Dutt's online disclosure cleverly exploited this new symbolic possibility. That is why the modern struggle for Dalit identity is largely taking place on social media. Hashtags like #DalitLivesMatter and #CasteAway question traditional semiotic theory from a new angle. The 'signifier' is a tweet, an article, even a viral video. Yashika Dutt's book is a pioneering document of this digital liberation. As social media analyst Gail Omvedt has noted, Dalit movements have used media tools very effectively throughout history from Ambedkar's newspapers to today's digital platforms. Yashika Dutt's writing is a new chapter in this continuum.

Caste, Class, Feminism: A Map of Three-Layered Oppression

Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality theory is a theoretical perspective that is particularly relevant to Yashika Dutt's book. It deals the idea that the oppressions of race, class, and gender interact and work together. In Dutt's book, Class and womanhood together form a complex network of oppression. Although Dutt's family is Dalit, they have adopted a middle-class identity. This class mobility has not obscured caste oppression, on the contrary, it has complicated it. The identity of 'middle-class Dalit' has pressures in both directions: upper-caste people will reject her as a Dalit; Dalit communities will question her as a compromiser for class interests. Yashika Dutt documents this double pressure very honestly in her work. This is theoretically important: Dalit identity is not a monolithic, unchanging entity it is constantly reshaped by a multitude of factors, including class, gender, education, and urban-rural location. Feminist theorist Uma Chakravarti has argued that caste and gender constitute a 'dual system of domination' in Indian society. Yashika Dutt's book reveals this dual system, subtly, painfully, but powerfully, through the life of an individual.

Language Politics and English Writing: Yashika Dutt's Linguistic Choice

The fact that *Coming Out as Dalit* is written in English is an important political choice. English has a complex symbolic meaning in India: on the one hand, it is an instrument of colonial domination; on the other, it is the language that, under Ambedkar's inspiration, became a stepping stone to equality for Dalits. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar himself studied in English, wrote in English, and used English as a tool for Dalit liberation. Yashika Dutt continues this Ambedkarian linguistic tradition. English becomes an 'open space' here and a linguistic space where caste-based social grammars are less imposed. From another perspective, writing in English has created an international readership for Dutt's book. It connects Dalit experiences to global human rights discourses. However, this choice also comes at a price: the book does not directly reach Dalit communities that do not read English. This gap remains an ongoing political question in Dalit literature. As linguist Ganesh Devy has noted, language, in India, is not only a tool of communication but also an expression of power. Yashika Dutt's choice of English is like challenging caste power with one of that power's own tools is a semiotic subversion.

The Place of *Coming Out as Dalit* in Contemporary Dalit Literature

Coming Out as Dalit was published in 2019, at a turning point in the history of Indian English literature. During this same period, young Dalit writers like Yashmine Pathma and Sukhartha Manoharan also raised their voices. This overall movement can be called the 'New Dalit Literary Wave'. The book's unique contribution is that it uses the technique of 'appropriation of form' with great skill. Taking the form of the English modern autobiography and filling it with Dalit content and it has a profound impact on a wide range of readers. Form and content combine to create a powerful semiotic explosion. *Coming Out as Dalit*, from a comparative literature perspective, can be seen as a beautiful dialogue with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. All three books vividly portray the pain of concealing a particular identity (of colour or caste) and the freedom of expressing it. Dalit literature has long been marginalized in Indian English literary criticism. The success of *Coming Out as Dalit* challenged this marginalization. It was not just a commercial success, and it was a literary political achievement.

Coming Out as Dalit portrays educational institutions as a key arena of caste discrimination. Schools and colleges are the places of learning instead, they are also symbolic arenas where caste identities are spoken, hidden, and reshaped. In Dutt's experience, questions like 'who do you eat with' and 'whose house do you play at' in educational institutions function as semiotic tests that reveal caste. As Indian sociologists of education have shown, educational institutions, while appearing to work towards equality, reinforce caste differences from within. Yashika Dutt's book documents this paradox as a vivid, personal testimony.

Memory and Caste: The Semiotics of Subliminal Historical Records

Human memory is a dialectical function of the brain, and it is also a semiotic arena. In Yashika Dutt's book, memories are selected, shaped, and expressed in a very deliberate way. This process is a psychological semiotic act. As the researcher Maurice Halbwachs noted in his theory of 'collective memory', individual memories are always shaped by social structures.

The book contains two types of memories: memories that conceal caste and memories that reveal caste. Both of these operate as separate symbolic waves in Dutt's autobiography. In the memories of concealment, pressure, anxiety, and constant vigilance prevail; in the memories of revelation, relief, power, and rebirth reign.

Paul Ricoeur's theory of 'narrative identity', presented in his book *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), to further understand this semiotics of memory, provides a good perspective. According to Ricoeur, when a person tells his life story, that story both creates and redefines that person's identity. Yashika Dutt's act of writing her autobiography and openly saying 'I am Dalit' which is a storytelling event that transforms her identity from caste secrecy to caste dignity. Moreover, psychologists argue that the act of writing autobiography is a therapeutic art. Yashika Dutt's book also has this healing dimension. When memories of pain are put into words, that pain becomes a testimonial object is also a tool for social understanding.

Food, Cooking, and Caste: Deep Dimensions of the Symbolic Arena of Home

Coming Out as Dalit features food as a very important semiotic sign. In India, food has always been deeply intertwined with the symbolic structure of caste. Who we eat with, what we eat, and where we eat, all these three questions are symbolic choices that reveal or conceal caste identity.

Mary Douglas, food anthropologist, established that food taboos function as powerful symbols that mark social boundaries in her book *Purity and Danger* (1966). When Yashika Dutt's family engages in certain food practices, they are performing a semiotic boundary crossing.

In his book *Caste Matters* (2019), Dalit scholar Suraj Yengde explains how food and caste function as subtle but powerful tools of oppression in India. Yashika Dutt's book confirms this theoretical position through a lived experience. The kitchen, the meal, the festival days, all these constitute the most intense sites of caste semiotic performance in Dutt's autobiography.

Looking at it from a deeper perspective, food also becomes a language of love. When a Dalit family cooks 'upper caste' food, it is not just a social code, and it embodies deeply human feelings of survival, security, and family affection. Yashika Dutt describes this complex context with great poetic honesty. Thus, food, viewed through the lens of semiotic theory, is not only a tool of oppression. It is also a complex symbol of human connection, love, and the will to survive.

Dalit Autobiography and Legal Recognition: Literature and Justice

Dutt's book is not only a literary document, but also a juridical testimony. The Constitution of India, particularly Article 17, proclaims the 'abolition of untouchability'. But Yashika Dutt's autobiography vividly reveals the gap between the constitutional promise and the social reality and the experiences of the Dalit community.

Legal scholar Upendra Baxi proposed the concept of 'laws of the oppressed' in India — the imperative for the oppressed to express their grievances in legal language. Yashika Dutt's book transcends this legal language and reveals the truth of Dalit life in a literary language. This is a very important paradigm shift.

Autobiographies play a crucial role in the Dalit rights movement. When Ambedkar narrates Dalit experiences in his autobiography *Waiting for a Visa*, it simultaneously serves as personal testimony, political demand, and legal argument. Yashika Dutt's book continues this Ambedkarian literary-juridical tradition. *Coming Out as Dalit* is a literary-juridical demand that bridges the gap between India's promise of equality and the reality of caste.

Moreover, the book focuses on the concept of 'visibility' in Dalit identity politics. Visibility is the first requirement for social recognition. Yashika Dutt's 'coming out' is a deliberate, courageous act that creates this visibility. This act is a call not only to the Dalit community but to all Indians: to see the truth of caste and to take responsibility for its abolition.

Reading Politics and Dalit Books: Who Reads and How?

The reception of a book plays a crucial role in shaping its meaning. *Coming Out as Dalit* is read differently by different circles of readers: Dalit readers find it a reflection of their lives; upper-caste readers find it an 'eye-opening' experience; international readers find it a key to understanding India's caste system. As Stanley Fish has noted in his theory of 'interpretive communities', a reader's social experience determines how he or she reads a book. In the case of *Coming Out as Dalit*, the reading experience of a Dalit reader and the reading experience of an upper-caste reader are fundamentally different. This difference multiplies the social impact of the book. Dalit reading collectives are now springing up in many cities in India. In these collectives, books like *Coming Out as Dalit* function as a tool for collective dialogue, as a book of political awakening rather than as a book for one person to read. This kind of collective reading adds a new dimension to Dalit identity politics. In literary criticism, the concept of 'ethics of care' is the ability to feel the sorrow and joy of the characters in a book while reading. When readers of *Coming Out as Dalit* experience this ethic of care, they are taking on a social responsibility rather than reading a story. Taking on this responsibility is a very important step in the direction of Dalit liberation.

The Future of Indian English Literature and Dalit Voices: A Perspective

The field of Indian English Literature (IEL) has for decades been dominated by the voices of upper-middle-class, mostly upper-caste writers. Yashika Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* challenges this status quo and demands a fairer place for Dalit voices. This demand such as expressive power, artistic quality, political acumen, provides an important direction for the future of Indian English literature. Frantz Fanon, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth (1961)*, argued that when colonized peoples find their voices, those voices can be the beginning of a revolution. This discovery applies to Dalit literature too. When Dalit writers write in English, they engage in an international discourse and bringing caste oppression to the world's attention.

Literary publishers fulfil a very important social responsibility when they give space to Dalit voices. Aleph Book Company's publication of Dutt's book is an important Dalit stand. Any effort to expand the space for Dalit writings in the Indian literary landscape is a cultural investment that strengthens Indian democracy. When critics read Dutt's book, they feel and identify that they are fulfilling a social responsibility instead of measuring the literary quality. The critical reception of the book is evidence of this responsibility being fulfilled. The fact that the book was published by Juggernaut Books in 2019 and has attracted widespread attention confirms that the readership for Dalit voices has expanded. Finally, if the future of Indian English literature is to be richer, more authentic, and more just, Dalit voices must be at its center. Yashika Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* is a groundbreaking, transformative journey towards that center. This journey must continue as more Dalit writers must be heard, more books must be published, and more studies must delve deeper into these voices.

Conclusion

This research paper began its journey with a very clear question: is caste concealment just silence, or is it more than that, a semiotic structure? It answers to this question through various theoretical perspectives: caste concealment is a highly structured, socially determined, and deeply psychologically rooted symbolic structure. Through Roland Barthes' semiotics, we have established that the body, name, and home function as key signifiers of caste concealment. Through Erwin Goffman's performance theory, it explained that caste concealment functions as a perpetual theatre for a loaded performance. Through Sedgwick's queer theory, the research paper argued that the concept of 'coming out' also applies to caste identity. Through Ambedkar's caste abolitionist philosophy, the research paper established that expressing Dalit identity is a political act. Through Crenshaw's

intersectional theory, and showed that caste, class and gender oppress simultaneously. From a linguistic political perspective, writing in English is a symbolic representation of meanings, the extraction of either thoughts or emotions. Writing an autobiography becomes an instrument for the transformation of one's identity, according to the concept of memory of the theory of semiotics.

Coming Out as Dalit stands as a turning point in the history of Indian literature. Dutt's book demonstrates that the concept of legible bodies, the ability to read caste codes, is a cover-up, while bodies are codes, the only way to systematically manage those codes. Illegible wounds such as the internal pains, stresses, and lost identities caused by caste are not yet fully described, not yet fully understood. But Yashika Dutt's book begins that narrative very boldly, very clearly, very beautifully.

This article is intended to serve as a foundation for future Dalit scholars, literary critics, and academics. For those who have read *Coming Out as Dalit*, this article will provide a new theoretical perspective; for those who have not, it will serve as an invitation to read the book. Caste still exists in India but the voice of Yashika Dutt, the philosophy of Ambedkar, and the works of Dalit writers continue to question it. Exploring these questions, supporting these voices, and celebrating these works is our collective responsibility.

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