

DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

The invisibilising of queer Dalits in Yashica Dutt's 2019 memoir

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Yashica Dutt. | Photo Credit: X/@YashicaDutt

Dutt erases queer Dalit voices while claiming the term “coming out” for herself, overlooking its origins and complex marginalised experiences.

The Amazon Prime video series, *Made In Heaven (MIH)*, opened the floodgates to an unresolved spat over demands for credit and allegations of appropriation. At the centre of the spat is a fictional character, Dr Pallavi Menke, enacted by the well-known Indian actor, Radhika Apte. The controversy started because the story of Menke seemed similar to the life and written works of a Dalit writer, Yashica Dutt, who demanded credit and acknowledgement from Amazon Prime Video.

The makers of *MIH* denied basing Menke on Dutt’s life and works, saying that the characterisation was fictional, drawn from a wide body of works and life stories, including those of the episode director, Neeraj Ghaywan, who is also Dalit. In the opening scene of Season 2, Episode 5, there is a passing reference to “coming out as Dalit”. This phrase is also the title of Dutt’s 2019 memoir. According to the makers of *MIH*, the phrase was originally used in a 2007 article by me and not by Dutt. More recently, in an opinion piece, I have said that both *MIH* and Dutt appropriated the idea of “coming out” without acknowledging its queer origin.

Something like this has never happened before. A public debate among marginalised persons: a Dalit writer demanding credit in the work of a Dalit filmmaker and a queer Dalit academic pushing back against both. Some media reports mischaracterised these conversations as slamming each other, fighting it out, etc. This article is a reasoned engagement with this moment and its potential to reveal something crucial about the representation of marginalities.

Dutt’s 2019 memoir was mostly received well in the English media. It was even awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in 2021. A revised edition is slated to be published soon.

Dismantling barriers of marginalisation

Before any critical commentary, there has to be a strong acknowledgement of the marginalisation and near absence of Dalit women writers. Baby Kamble, “Bama” Faustina Soosairaj, Gogu Shyamala, Sivakami, Sujatha Gidla, and other Dalit women writers have been crucial for representing a constituency long silenced, erased, and denied its due. In the mapping of these margins and in an emerging body of works, there has to be more

attention to the ideas, vocabulary, and conceptual frameworks that serve as tools for dismantling the barriers of marginalisation, elevating one form of marginalisation, and obscuring another.

“Until I came out as Dalit, I passed as an upper-caste Hindu,” Dutt says in her memoir (p.7). While acknowledging the idea of “passing” in relation to the experiences of African Americans, the memoir is oddly silent about the origins of “coming out”—in relation to the experiences of the LGBTIQ+ community. Dutt also fails to have any meaningful engagement with the idea of passing. The memoir sheds light on the structural barriers to gaining admission into an elite convent school, for example, but there is no acknowledgement of the significance of “passing as an upper-caste”. When the author became “head of the school council” (p.23), it might have been, at least partly, a dividend of such passing. Rather than place any significance on this, the author attributes it to something extraordinary and outstanding about herself. “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.” (p.36). More than dumb luck and lack of competition, there might have been a more meaningful linkage between the caste-based barriers that are rampant in schools and the significance of Dutt’s “passing as dominant caste.



A scene from the episode “And They Lived Happily Ever After” (season 2, episode 5) of *Made In Heaven*. In that episode, there is a passing reference to “coming out as Dalit”. This phrase is also the title of Yashica Dutt’s 2019 memoir but according to the makers of *MIH*, the phrase was originally used in a 2007 article by Sumit Baudh. | Photo Credit: YouTube Screenshot

The idea of passing is also conflated with the idea of hiding one's caste. When the author was trying to get admission into another school, she states, "[t]his time, Mum openly told me to hide my caste and answer 'Parashar Brahmin' when asked" (p.35). "[...] I knew there was a real need to hide my caste (p.36). [...] So hiding my caste was something I internalized" (p.37).

Despite repeated references to this idea of hiding her caste, Dutt omits any mention of a short story titled "When I Hid My Caste", written by a Dalit author, Baburao Bagul, originally published in Marathi in 1963. Later in the book, in Chapter 9, there is a segment on Marathi literature (pp. 123-125), but here too Dutt makes no reference to Bagul. These omissions are remarkable because the idea of hiding her caste is thematically significant to the memoir, and also because the English translation of Bagul's stories was republished prominently as *When I Hid My Caste* (Speaking Tiger) in 2018, prior to the publication of Dutt's memoir in 2019.

The idea of 'passing'

The idea of hiding one's caste is used interchangeably and conflated with the idea of passing. Writing about her mother, Dutt says how, "Hinduism has been another way for her to get closer to an upper-caste identity—the deeper her knowledge about Hindu rituals and traditions, the more easily she could pass as Brahmin" (p.50, italics mine). While writing about a refusal to disclose her caste identity, Dutt states, "I refused to *disclose* mine, saying that my parents were progressive and didn't discuss these things at home, most of my colleagues assumed I was upper-caste because of my English. [...] I was *passing* so well that people easily believed I was one of them. [...] *passing* was the best thing that could have happened for my resume" (p.65, italics mine).

Hiding and refusing to disclose something is etymologically not the same as passing. Hiding and refusing to disclose something is passive while passing implies something done more actively to present oneself on certain lines. For example, a Dalit person taking on a *savarna* surname, recurring self-assertions of being *savarna*, etc. There are other particularities of race, such as phenotype, that are not as clearly discernible in caste-based groups. These kinds of particularities, of race and caste, have to be considered while making analogous claims to the idea of "passing".

“Dutt’s 2019 memoir is neither about passing nor about coming out. It is an empty rhetoric of analogy that invisibilises queer Dalit persons.”

Another crucial juncture at which the author jostled with her caste identity is when she sought admission into universities in India. Unable to get a seat in medical and engineering colleges, Dutt took a gap year (p.58). The following year, while applying at the prestigious St. Stephen’s College in New Delhi, Dutt says, “Mum suggested, for the very first time, that I tick the box that said I was an SC/ST candidate. [...] So I closed my eyes, ticked the box, and hoped no one would notice” (pp. 60-61).

The SC/ST is not just a box to tick. The Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes categories are qualifying conditions for availing “reservation quotas”, also understood as “affirmative action” in the US. It is not as simple as ticking a box. Ticking that box requires a formal legal certificate to be attached to the application form.

At no point in the memoir does Dutt talk about getting SC certification. Who got it done for her, how, why? If indeed the author was “passing” as “upper-caste”, any legal SC certification would disrupt that instantly. The author could have talked a bit more about the “very first time” her mother suggested she tick the SC/ST box. At that moment, did the author know of the legal certification? If she did, how did she relate to it, how did she obtain it? Or was the certification obtained behind her back, without her knowledge?

Correlating ‘passing’ and ‘coming out’

These questions are crucial for tracing the analogous ideas of “passing” and “coming out”. The idea of the closet is a corollary to the idea of coming out in the LGBTIQ+ universe. In Dutt’s *Coming Out As Dalit*, there is no mention of a closet. Not even once. So, it is not clear what Dutt is “coming out” of. The idea of passing conveys social mobility that is acquired by presenting oneself as white. Dutt correlates passing and coming out, in the sense that the author is said to have “passed” as a Brahmin before she “came out” as Dalit. To that extent, Dutt appears wholly uninformed of the metaphorical immobility of closet spaces. Coming out is a mobility of sorts, it is a liberation from the confinement of the closet. From the mobility of “passing” as Brahmin to the mobility of “coming out” as Dalit,

Dutt conflates the two ideas. More troubling than this conflation is the fact that the memoir presents an empty rhetoric of analogies that causes an invisibilising of queer Dalits.

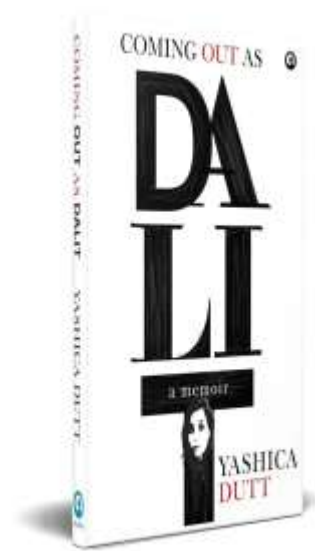
“The invisibilising of queer Dalits in Dutt’s 2019 memoir has to be understood in the longer context of the combined failure of anti-caste and feminist politics to foster queer ideas from their point of origin in India.”

In an interview at Berkeley University in 2021, Dutt was asked about ways in which “coming out” is often used by the LGBTIQ+ communities and the use of the term in her book title. Dutt replied, “I cannot speak for those experiences. But what they’re doing is that they are navigating a world that’s not meant to accommodate them. And that’s what Dalits are doing as well. We’re navigating a world that is built to keep us out.” Dutt’s placement of them-and-us implies that marginalised groups are placed in mutually exclusive either-or sets; the experiences of one group are said to be just like the experiences of another.

Invisibilising queer Dalits

In the US, “Gay is the new black” is an example of a rhetorical claim that sets apart gay persons from black persons, and it implicitly posits all gay persons as white. Not only is this empirically false, it also channels a discursive understanding of one marginality into another. Dutt’s “coming out” as Dalit with no engagement with LGBTIQ+ discourse displaces queerness, conflates it with being Dalit, and invisibilises the openly out queer Dalit people.

This invisibility has wider significance in claims of representation. The more dominant segments among the marginalised often become group representatives by default. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s conceptual frameworks of intersectionality showed how black women could neither serve as representatives in class action suits on behalf of women as a category nor of black persons as a category. The default representatives of the two marginalised groups were the more dominant segments in each: white women and black men, respectively. As a result of this “representational intersectionality,” black women and women of colour are effectively invisibilised.



Yashica Dutt's 2019 memoir *Coming Out As Dalit* was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in 2021. In its omission of queerness, Dutt's memoir posits a cisgendered heterosexual Dalit woman as a representation of marginality.

Marginalities are relative. In a comparative understanding of representational intersectionality, black women in feminist and anti-racist politics could be compared with Dalit women in feminist and anti-caste politics. Men are the more dominant segment among marginalised Dalit groups, and *savarna* women are the more dominant segment among women's groups. Beyond anti-caste and feminist groups, other segments are also subjected to this phenomenon of representational intersectionality. Cisgendered heterosexual women are more dominant among Dalit women, with trans and queer Dalit women marginalised in the segment. In these relative configurations of marginalities, it is important to pay attention to who gets to represent whom. Who gets erased, invisibilised, and to what effect?

In its omission of queerness, Dutt's memoir posits a cisgendered heterosexual Dalit woman as a representation of marginality. Meanwhile, for over a decade and a half, openly "out" queer Dalit persons have been struggling to visibilise queerness within anti-caste groups. Queerness was not eagerly received among anti-caste and feminist groups; rather, isolation, alienation, and invisibilising of queer persons were common. Dutt's memoir maintains that invisibilising.

Dutt's more recent declarations, "I AM queer. Always have been", on social media platform X (in September 2023) cannot retrospectively undo the invisibilising caused by

her. At the start of the memoir, in the fourth line of the Author's Note (p. ix), Dutt states, "After I came out as Dalit, I no longer had anything to hide." A claim that turns out to be false—because now it seems Dutt was hiding her queerness. Even if Dutt's forthcoming revised memoir were to accept and embrace this queerness, it would be an afterthought, an apology for the falsehoods of the 2019 memoir.

Hypothetically, even an author who self-identifies as gay and black cannot defend the slogan, "Gay is the new black." In principle, the slogan is indefensible for its displacement of racism as something of the past (post-racism) and for replacing one form of oppression with another. Even if the individual experiences of a hypothetical gay and black author were to somehow validate the slogan, it cannot be a representation of the American reality where racism and homophobia coexist, among other forms of oppression.

Empty rhetoric

As such, Dutt's 2019 memoir is neither about passing nor about coming out. It is an empty rhetoric of analogy that invisibilises queer Dalit persons. Interestingly, this seems to have missed the attention of the publisher, Aleph Book Company, the awarding committee of the 2021 Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar, journalists, academia, and book critics more broadly. That is the function of structural invisibility. It can happen unknowingly because the composition of editorial teams, awarding committees, academia, etc., is often along dominant lines of race, caste, class, sex, etc. Even when there is some form of representation of marginalities among these groups, there are other forms of marginalisation that remain invisible.

Reading one marginality through the marginality of another (even if intersecting) group can fail to do something crucial in matters of representation, visibility, and recognition. The invisibilising of queer Dalits in Dutt's 2019 memoir has to be understood in the longer context of the combined failure of anti-caste and feminist politics to foster queer ideas from their point of origin in India.

Distortions and invisibilising of marginalisation are antithetical to the ideas of diversity and representation, whether in literary works such as Dutt's memoir or in visual media narratives such as *MIH*. More conscious efforts have to be made to improve the representation of marginalities at all levels and in all fields. Analogies and assertions of

identities must engage with surrounding discourses for an improved understanding of marginalisation and for more inclusive discourses on representations, recognition, and intersectional solidarities.

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