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# Intersectionality, Dalit Feminism, Silence, Speakability, and Yashica Dutt's Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir

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**Abstract**

Yashica Dutt is a Dalit Indian writer. Coming Out as Dalit is her memoir, published in 2019. Among other accolades, the book has also received the Sahitya Akademi Award, a prestigious award in India. This thesis critiques Dutt's memoir from an intersectional Dalit feminist standpoint. It aligns with the ontological questions relating to the definition of Dalit/ Subaltern and whether or not the subalterns speak, addressing the conceptual monolith that is veritably at the bottom of the issue of an authentic Dalit/subaltern voice in the aggregated scholarly discourse of South Asia and constructing two arguments. One, Dutt, by instituting herself as a voicing subject, dispenses with performing within the influential narrative of subaltern unspeakability, and two, she, in the process of narrating her story, destructures the stereotypes essentializing Subalternity or Dalit womanhood. While Yashica Dutt is not the first memoirist to do this, she is indeed one of the most recent of the lot and does this influentially.

***Keywords:*** *Yashica Dutt, Memoir,Unspeakability, Subalternity, Dalit womanhood.*

"Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected .... the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If... the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" ( Spivak 1988; 287)

"The truth is that I don't 'look like a Dalit' – the kind of Dalit we are used to seeing in media, cinema, pop-culture (when we see them at all). But that doesn't change the fact that Dalits – around all 250 million of us – don't look the same. Not all of us live in rural areas, just like not all of us live in the cities. I can look, present, react, respond in any way I want and none of those things make me (or anyone else) any less of a Dalit or my Dalitness any less valid. This is the real danger of the single narrative. It perpetuates this false idea that Dalits only have to be a certain type of person, i.e. possibly uneducated or unable to speak..." ( Dutt 2019)

A Dalit/subaltern memoir by New York-based journalist and writer Yashica Dutt is at the core of this work. But *Coming Out as Dalit : A Memoir* (2019), as her work is called, doesn't wholly conciliate with the popular idea of Dalithood. It does talk about the structural violence against Dalits in India though and the fact that Yashica herself was a victim of that widespread ideational injustice. In fact the prejudice cognitively impaired her so much that Yashica required a large amount of time to make peace with her identity and come out. Prior to that, by her own assertion, she was a" closeted" (Dutt 2021 54:34) Dalit. She used to pretend and pass off as an upper-caste person, facilitated by her appearance and urban education. A subaltern death at the University of Hyderabad in 2016 allegedly due to the caste discrimination within university premises, was her guilt trigger.

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It allowed her to begin the process of accepting her identity. But by the very act of being a Dalit/subaltern memoir, Dutt's work importantly disputes the social stereotype of Dalit silence, perhaps most influentially theorized by Spivak in 1988. Though Yashica Dutt is not the first memoirist to be at variance (either to the stereotype or the mainstream understanding of Spivak's theorization so to speak), speakability being a major trope in the genre of Dalit memoir, she is one of the latest and certainly influential millennial voices to shove the paradigm.

In *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1988), Spivak writes, "The subaltern cannot speak. The representation hasn't withered away. The female intellectual... has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (308). In the discourse, Spivak institutes a difference between an elite westernised female scholar and an indigenous woman at the margin, without agency, othered, and incapable of making a social epistemic contribution (Riach 2017; 12), frequently translated in Indian languages and politics as a Dalit woman. She builds this distinction explicitly and influentially, necessitating the figure of a congruent victim who doesn't speak and, even when she does, is certainly not heard. *Coming Out as Dalit : A Memoir* (2019), though not singly but importantly, breaks out of this discourse. It doesn't just institute Dutt within the episteme of speakability and agency but also acknowledges the plurality and intersectionality of Dalit / subaltern experiences.

Dalit, Subaltern, and Dalit as Subaltern :

The word Dalit, deriving from the Sanskrit word Dalita, means exploited. It is a descriptor for a large set of people marked to live at the very edge of Indian society, depending on the traditional Indian caste system. 'Untouchables' and 'Harijan' were the other generic terms previously used. The last was adopted by Gandhi and his followers in the 1930s for articulating their political assimilationism. It is now disused on account of the paternalistic undertones. The word Dalit was perhaps first used by the social reformer Jyotirao Phule in the context of caste oppression in the late 19th-century India. It was popularized by B. R. Ambedkar and thus is articulated with a history of political progressivism (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998; 4). Dalit studies as an academic field has started to grow in India and is directional to speculate on the figure of the Dalit (subaltern) as a politico-cultural actor within the Indian society ( Rawat and Satyanarayana2016; ix).

In *Subaltern Studies I* (1982) Ranajit Guha writes that subaltern means "of inferior rank"(vii) and that in the discourse of the Subaltern Collective is extended to mean " the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way"(Ibid).

Despite the scope of this definition, designating the Dalit within this width has been unsure and even often missing. In *Dalit Studies* (2016) Rawat and Satyanarayana write, "In the subaltern studies project... caste inequity was not the core feature" (14). Partha Chatterjee's *Nation and it's Fragments* (1993) is marked for having looked past casteism and the high-powered anti-caste movements in India (Gupta, 7)[9]. In *Subalternities in India and Latin America* (2022) Sonya Surabhi Gupta too quibbles about this absence (lbid).

However, regardless of this common erasure, this thesis acknowledges Dalits as subalterns without any conceptual hesitation. It sees Ranajit Guha's definition as a premise not just because it chronologically is, but because Guha's definition is inclusive of caste-based marginalisation in India. Also crucially, it doesn't specify unspeakability as a condition of subalternity unlike Spivak's definition. Spivak's definition, according to my understanding without ignoring its' metaphoric condensation, is muteness-specific.

In 2016, a few months after her 'come out - post' on Facebook that eventually transferred into *Coming Out as Dalit : A Memoir (* 2019), Dutt, on Tumblr wrote,

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"Four months ago, when I decided to 'come out' as Dalit .... I didn't know I would discover my history hollowed out by systemic oppression and recognize a society that never stopped hating me or my people for being who we are....But I also didn't know that being Dalit would give me my voice.... A voice that I had used otherwise but was never as unfettered, assertive or loudly heard as it was when I used it as a Dalit" (Ibid)

In her 2019 interview with Newslaundry in India, Dutt more plainly said that she, as a Columbia University graduate, certainly was more privileged than many upper-caste Indians disadvantaged due to the economy, but that her suffocation as a Dalit was real too though often painfully missed and diluted owing to her otherwise favoured affiliations (Ibid).

"The presumed subject of feminist politics," writes Nivedita Menon in *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* (2020), "has been destabilised in India most notably by the politics of caste.... The politics of caste... insistently pose a question mark over the assumed commonality of female experience, thus challenging the identity of 'woman'..."(28) ; Dutt's exposure to otherness and the theoretical difficulty in approaching it are, however, due to the discursive experiences of her identity that are not wholly calibratable within the social idea of Dalithood or how, through a high-profile hypothesis of unspeakability, powerlessness, and mediation Subalternity was conceptually woven at 1988 and heavily cited eversince even beyond hardcore educational boundary having obtained support from the homologous para-intellectual framework and praxes though not always sticking to the original lineation. Dalit silence was not a new idea, but Spivak's proposition gave the concept a major theoretical and parasocial pull.

Spivak's Muteness Hypothesis and the Discursive Constitution of the Dait/Subaltern

In her interview with Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean in 1996 Spivak states that more than the actual fact of producing utterances she is concerned about how the utterances are built by "a certain kind of psychobiography", subjected to a set pattern of historic interpretaion (291) though certainly coming at the cost of her hypothesis being inadequately understood and literally interpreted (Ibid).

Spivak's intention and presentation in *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1988) are densely located at the intersections between knowledge, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and patriarchy, and as a "bricoleur" (Riach, 2017; 54), it wasn't perhaps difficult for her to achieve. There are different propositions in the essay that Spivak used as leads to reach her final statement. From the parochial western outlook dominating intellectualism to European paternalism towards the Orient and the brown female body as the site of inscription and her agency still systematically oppressed at the intersections of privilege and oppression in neo-colonial India, Spivak's essay combines all these threads. Despite the fact that perhaps Spivak only tried to magnify attention to the "psychobiography" ( Spivak,1996; 291) of subaltern utterances and the process of their misrepresentations even when approached with the best object and the politics of quieting and othering subalterns as epistemic subjects more than their literal silence, Spivak was and continues to be decoded as having influentially attested subaltern unspeakability that has stayed, enhanced, and appears to have a secure afterlife ( Ibid), agreeing more with the pre-occurring stereotype diluting Spivak's control to a substantial extent.

Dalit silence is not untrue. But the silence is not the only truth of the community. In her book (2019) Yashica Dutt writes that popular media is more comfortable covering stories about victimized Dalits .

" There were no stories about people like me.... after I came out as Dalit, several expressed amazement that I could speak English. It was almost as if without going through horrific violence or abuse or growing up in extreme poverty in a remote rural area, I couldn't possibly be Dalit"(158).

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In *Being a Dalit in Independent India* (2016), Sanghapali Aruna, an anti-caste and digital activist, says that one of her students who came to her for "tuitions" (00:58) was stunned by Aruna's Dalit identity for two reasons: 1. according to the girl, Aruna didn't look like a Dalit, and 2. because she, as a non-Daliit person, never treated Aruna like a Dalit. What is notable here is that the upper caste/mainstream notion of Dalit identity is not just dependent on or a product of birth within a caste-ridden structure but also can be a product of upper-caste gaze and treatment.

These indeed are just two slivers of encounters from the range of experiences tangible for Dalits. But they do not predominantly see representations across the politico-cultural spectrum, genuflecting to the control of silence and sufferance as discursive lenses of description, inversely also adding on to the stereotype.

In *Dalit Cinema* (2018), Suraj Yengde observes that caste and its depictions are mostly absent from mainstream Bollywood and says that whatever Dalit/ subaltern roles are visible in Bollywood are mainly "reduced to those of victims ... and almost invariably played by non-Dalit actors—Saif Ali Khan, Naseeruddin Shah, and Shabana Azmi, among others" (6). In *OTT Platforms and the New Dalit Characters in Indian Cinema* (2022) Harish. S. Wankhede writes that the so-called neo-Dalit characters in contemporary OTT productions, while purporting to be progressive and situated within urban parameters and aspirations, are also created as characters "indifferent to the ideal of social justice" (Ibid) and thus they are metaphorically silenced and without well-formed subjectivities.Likewise, according to Rajiv Thind, the mainstream treatment of Dalit characters in so-called caste neutral literature does not escape politicisation of Dalits in the line of portraying them as "suffering creatures without meaningful agency or as Gandhian Harijans" (Thind, "How are Punjabi Dalits presented in English fiction, especially in novels by upper caste writers") supported by upper caste benevolence.

When an assertion of Dalithood goes past these pre-given paradigms, it becomes incomprehensible and is subjected to ruthless dissections, debates, non- acceptance and online trolling in recent years for being disruptive as caste is still "the invisible arm that turns the gears in nearly every system" (Dutt 2019;10) in India. Female voices from the community are seen as particularly disturbing because ideologues of "brahmanical patriarchy" (Chakravarty, 1993) are doubly offended by their speakability and assertions.

In *Why I finally 'Came Out' as Dalit and What Happened Next* (2016) Yashica Dutt writes,

"A lot of upper-caste Indians, ensconced in their caste prejudice, have evidently had a hard time dealing with my coming out. To see a “lower caste” Dalit woman, a former “untouchable,” refusing to be ashamed of her caste, and instead turning it into a narrative of pride has noticeably pricked several egos....There’s been intense scrutiny...that I might not be Dalit at all..." (Ibid).

In *Hypocrisy Of the Mainstream Media: Lessons From the Dalit Asmita Yatra* (2016) Nupur Preeti Alok accuses Savarna media of particularly sidelining and trivializing Dalit women leaders while expropriating the Dalit contribution in general(Ibid).

These expropriations are paradigmatic and extensively exercised, but due to standardization, they are not always explicit or identifiable.

Amidst these conspiracies trying to choke resistant female voices from the Dalit community and politically, socially, and artistically representing them through fragmentations and within a pre-given plot, works like *Coming Out as Dalit : A Memoir* (2019) that celebrate robust Dalit/subaltern assertions while placing the authors—the Dalit women—within the parameters of modern aspirations and anxieties humanising them, are

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still quite rare and very apposite to demythify the image of Dalit women as mute creatures helping to realise them in their full humanity capable of diverse involvements and intersectional experiences.

Ontology of Intersectionality, Dalit Feminism, Yashica Dutt's Speakability and Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir

Intersectionality is a politics of standpoint.It foregoes the representation of broken experiences. It is a validating lens through which the multidimensionality of involvement and participation and the possibility of having many identifications at once are acknowledged. The fact that the simultaneous existence of privilege and alienation is possible within an identity is sanctioned through intersectionality. Having origins in Black Feminism and the theorizations of intellectuals like Kimberle Crenshaw, Angela Davis, and Patricia Hill Collins, it concedes the coming together of different correlates, intensifying exploitation at first only of black women but gradually becoming wider, more inclusive, and dispersed in operation.

In India, intersectionality as a way of understanding is especially active in the Dalit/subaltern feminist context. First of all, Indian feminism is divided. "Caste-privileged feminists" purport to speak for all Indian women, while subaltern feminist groups oppose such homogenisation (Arya and Rathore, 2020 : 1) and highlight the crisis of Dalit women who disappear at the crossroads of caste and gender and are either not represented or only under-represented through set paradigms. Secondly, Indian feminism is not reducible to the Savarna vs. Dalit structure alone; there are other equally significant dimensions making it impossible to represent Indian women from scores of different backgrounds and suppressed along different tangents through a single axis of description. Plus, there are many more cracks, layers, and convergences. Dalit feminism or Subaltern feminism is not a monolith; it has its own cracks and most Dalit feminists also reject being subsumed by Indian feminism (Ibid) while from time to time other factions have other difficulties. So, Indian feminism is a fractured site.

Both majoritarian feminists and Dalit feminists in India debate over the suitability of intersersectionality as a frame. Many think it does not resonate with the subaltern Indian context having its origin in western experiences (Arya and Rathore,2020:5) and posing a threat to agreement-based politics and then there are Dalitists and feminists like Anindita Pan and Mary. E. John supporting the frame and it's validity for Dalit women.

In Mapping Dalit Feminism Anindita Pan writes,

"at the core of Dalit Feminism is the understanding that 'dalit woman'... is located at the intersection of caste and gender. Dalit women are not monolithic entities who can be neatly categorized either as 'women' or 'dalits'... Dalit Feminism highlights how dalit women are erased/ignored by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, and how the constructions of 'woman' and 'dalit' give prominence to savarna women and dalit men. Dalit Feminism addresses these erasures and additions by invoking intersectionality" (23).

According to Meena Gopal, "Dalit women have always been ... (multiply) burdened subjects whose issues can...only adequately be understood within an intersectional framework"(Arya and Rathore 2020 :7) and according to Mary. E. John intersectionality, as an ontological tool, is an identifier of a problem, ( and in the South Asian context, particularly Dalit women's problems, so to speak,) and not a solution to that problem (John 2016; 4:54-4:59).

But a prism that can enable us to see the imbricated character of Dalit women's oppression at this stage is enough of a problem solver, especially when, with each passing day, we are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of producing hermeneutical tools and lenses within society to understand different problems and consciously orient towards them. Similarly, statements, campaigns, and different cultural representations like films, literature, and other creative or non-creative expressions constituting epistemic resources that build us

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up to see Dalit women beyond the limits of historically overused words such as 'sufferer' and 'mute', without of course rejecting their truths in contexts, are crucial.

*Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) is a remarkable work of recent times looking at Dalit (subaltern) question(s) from a laudably candid Dalit female viewpoint that is even consistently impertinent. Yashica's journey of coming to terms with her identity and eventually accepting it with pride in a society that camouflages to be post-caste while deep down reeling under casteist and patriarchal prejudices offers a cross-sectional view of a fractured and deeply manipulative setup that has generationally conditioned Yashica and many like her to be embarrassed of their identities and hide them to escape stigma. Yashica writes,

"My grandfather, father and I experienced our Dalitness in vastly different ways. Dad—the son of a revered civil servant—wasn't forced down from his horse, nor was his wedding party disrupted. Two generations of prestigious government jobs and concealed last names had somewhat diluted the obvious markers of Dalitness. But not enough had changed that I could give a straight answer to the question: 'What caste are you from?' My Dalitness still weighed heavy on me; I dragged its carcass behind me through my childhood and into adulthood" (xii).

In the process, Yashica's story intersects with the fragments of different experiences, opinions, and politics of the Dalit community. She becomes a bold voice highlighting issues and setting up links that require understanding and dialogue. For example she writes,

"In 2015, Dr Shashi Tharoor, MP from Thiruvananthapuram, argued at an Oxford University debate that Britain owes India and other former colonies 'colonial reparations'. The entire upper-caste establishment cheered this heartily.... Following this, Tharoor wrote the bestselling An Era of Darkness on the same topic. But most Indians failed to see the irony in demanding compensation for nearly 200 years of colonial rule while refusing any reparation for thousands of years of discrimination against their own citizens. If paying collective reparations for collective guilt is appropriate, then how about India "atoning" for thousands of years of its caste system?" (88-89)

And further,

"Not only are Dalits isolated in communities because they are the ones who are forced to undertake the job of manual scavenging, they are further reviled because they eat beef and work with leather. Dalits ... have been singled out for discrimination for decades because they eat beef" (44).

And still further,

"Fashion is rarely ... a reflection of individual taste. The clothes we choose or can afford to wear are often telling signs of our class, and sometimes even caste...In a culture where Dalits are still attacked for flaunting a moustache or wearing jewellery, having style is also a subtle code for being upper caste...With the Internet, how we access and understand style has changed, but it's still a largely elitist interest" (98).

Yashica's story is simultaneously the story of her mother Sashi, a gritty Dalit woman who wanted her children to build their future outside the vicious fetters of caste and tutored them to assimilate while herself secreted it or believed she could secrete it through mimicking upper caste fashion, lifestyle choices, curated expensive birthday parties for her children, and yet, most often than not, was deficient. Her most glaring deficiency, however, was her struggle with the English language. Sashi was an inadequate English speaker. Her husband and in-laws frequently taunted her for not knowing how to speak the language. Though they meant it lightly it only added to Sashi's stress since as an educated woman she was always deeply aware of the cultural catchet

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attached to the language in India. As if in an effort to compensate for this deficiency Sashi wanted Yashica to speak fluent English and fought with her husband and in-laws to make sure that Yashica received elite education.

What is notable in Sashi's intersectional subjection to both Brahmanical and intracaste patriarchy is the contrariety of the constitution of her responses to both constructions. While her resistance to Dalit patriarchy came from a realm of moderate understanding and her recognition of it was more or less operative (despite the fact that Sashi's third pregnancy was forced upon her and that she occasionally complied; Sashi actively fought with her husband and in-laws to get her voice heard and her perspective accepted on the majority of occasions), Sashi unsuspectingly collaborated with casteist patriarchy in loathing her identity as a Dalit woman and carefully worked to eradicate it not just for her but also for her children.

Patriarchy almost always dissembles to accord women free choices as subjects. Sashi's broken acknowledgement of agency, intelligibly a product of that simulation, was nothing beyond what it was—limited and only partly understood. But how it panned out in Yashica Dutt's life and what use she put Sashi's fragmented awareness to is notable. In the most significant way possible, it created factors and background for Yashica to ultimately understand and apply her power and narrative as a Dalit woman the way she does—not just by speaking for herself but effectively calling attention to what it means to be a Dalit at present and a Dalit woman at present, destructuring paradigms and boundaries of shame, un speak ability, silence, and suffering essentializing Subalternity/ Dalithood and more so Dalit womanhood in the course of her memoir.

## Postscript

We live in many Indias. In *Many Indias Make One India*... (2015) Dheeraj Sinha writes that in today's India, circumstances are more intense when different cultures from within are juxtaposed together and made to confront each other to achieve their solutions and harmony (56). The present work, of course, does not agree with this hypothesis, or at least believes that the process of achieving intracultural solutions cannot be as smooth.

In *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* (2019) and elsewhere in interviews, Yashica Dutt recurrently talks of the banality of cultural formulae that she calls the "danger of the single narrative" (158). Dalits are parsed into and discussed through the paradigms of "reservation", "microagression," and "brutal oppression," but according to Dutt, Dalits occupying the "middle space of relative privilege"(Parajuly 2019 ; 5:04-5:10) of education, assertion, and agency are often circumvented from entitlement to their Dalithood and systemically invisibilized due to a lack of validation from stereotypes.

Indeed we live in many Indias. While this forced invisibilization is a reality, Rohith Vermula's death and many such deaths and various forms of Dalit repression happening almost regularly are realities, Yashica Dutt's Sahitya Academi is also a reality, and a nuanced appreciation of her 'coming out' is also a reality. In her interview with Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (1996) Spivak says, "even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act"(291).

It is perhaps redundant to highlight that this explanation of subaltern un speakability does not wholly represent the experiences of Dalit women in current India. It is true that Dalit women are deprived at the cross-section of brahmanism and the stringent patriarchal order, but even if they are continued to be stopped and dissuaded from expressions or only endorsed to express themselves in a certain way, many Dalit women are exponentially pushing boundaries through definite assertions and certainly getting heard more than ever, not as stereotypes but as outraged, resistant, visceral, vulnerable, real women, not apologetic for their stories or for their wokeness.

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