



Dalit Middle-Class Aspirations in Yashica Dutt's Coming Out As Dalit

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

Yashica Dutt is a renowned Dalit writer, journalist and activist who voices out the hopes, dreams and struggles of the Dalit middle-class in India. Her memoir, Coming Out As Dalit, published in 2019, shares her journey and highlights the hardships experienced by Dalit, the so-called lower caste people. The emergence of a caste marginalized middle-class in India signifies a socio-economic shift, challenging age-old caste discrimination and simultaneously coping with caste injustice. This research paper portrays the aspirations, struggles and transformation of Dalit middle-class individuals. It examines how Dutt's work advocates the role of education, representation and breaking the silence around a deeply marginalized social community. It analyses how the Dalit middle-class is striving for respect, recognition and social parity in new modern society. It explores why they strive for upward mobility, the obstacles they come across and the societal changes they envision. Using a social historical lens, the research places Dutt's work on caste, class and societal prejudice. It argues that

while financial progress authorizes some degree of social acceptance, deep-rooted caste discrimination continues to affect Dalit people. Even though they have education and financial security, they still experience social injustice.

Key Words

Yashica Dutt, Coming Out As Dalit, Middle-class, Caste mobility, Social aspirations.

Introduction

Yashica Dutt, Sahitya Akademi Award winner, is an author, journalist and anti-caste activist, recognized for her ground-breaking work in highlighting systematic caste inflicted inequality and exclusion. She hails from a Dalit family in Ajmer, Rajasthan. She was forced to conceal her identity in pursuit of education and professional opportunities. Her memoir, Coming Out As Dalit, is a revolutionary work that portrays her lived realities with a broader reflection on caste structure and privileges in India. Dutt, through her writing and activism, has established as a prominent voice advocating for equal rights, social justice and bringing an end to the old tradition of caste based hierarchy in modern society. Caste structures, as elaborated in her work, need societal change to achieve true equality and justice.

It is a gripping memoir that narrates Dutt's battle from concealing to embracing her Dalit identity. Dutt narrates how her family hides their Dalit identity to escape caste based discrimination. She pens down her constant internal struggle, the constant fear of being found out and the psychological toll of surpassing her identity. A significant moment of transformation was triggered by the tragic institutional murder of Rohit Vemula, a Dalit Ph.D scholar from Hyderabad, in 2016. His death exposed the brutal realities of caste based discrimination in academic spaces. Deeply affected, Dutt decided to publicly acknowledge her own caste identity. In reaction to that, she penned an unapologetic post on Facebook titled "Coming Out As Dalit," marking courage, turning point and clarity that led her to openly embrace her roots. This particular event not only inspired her personally but also galvanized her to become an outspoken activist for Dalit rights.

The memoir provides insights on the ancient social discrimination and the complexities facing modern India, with deep rooted issues surrounding caste hierarchies and narrates it through the eyes of an Indian woman critic towards the uneven society of India. She challenges the dominant upper caste narratives and resists the attempted silencing of a proud Dalit identity and dignity. Her story is not merely one of personal liberation, but a powerful call to action for border social change.

The development of a middle class within socially excluded groups in modern India represents a recent socio-economic shift driven by state-supported affirmative action, expanded educational opportunities, and the migration from agrarian villages to metropolitan centers. There is economic shift among Dalit communities, but socially, academically and professionally, they continue to face discrimination. Dutt's narration offers a compelling account of the development, challenges and the struggle faced by Dalit as they navigate middle-class aspirations.

This research highlights the motivations behind Dalit aspirations for middle-class status. They seek upward mobility and societal change to escape oppression, gain dignity, and build a just, inclusive society. It also examines the difficulties that hinder their progress, such as caste barriers, poverty discrimination and cultural struggles towards elite acceptance. This research, through an analysis of Dutt's depiction of Dalit middle-class experiences, sheds how caste and class dynamics are deeply intertwined in the Indian social fabric.

Dalit Aspirations and the Middle-class Dream

The complicated relationship between the Dalit identity and the longing for a respectable, aspirational middle-class life is depicted by Dutt in her memoir. The phrase Dalit aspirations and middle-class dreams captures the internal and external struggles that Dalit's encounter as they pursue socio-economic advancement via education, urban migration, and career success to overcome caste-based stigma.

1. The Desire for Middle Class Status

In her memoir, Dutt highlights the Dalit's common and powerful aspirations and their desire to become part of the Indian middle class. It illustrates that Dalits have been historically downgraded to the margins of society as a result of deep-rooted caste-based discrimination. Becoming middle class signifies financial progress, a method to reclaim identity and dignity and create a fresh future devoid of the burdens of caste.

The strongest motive for seeking middle-class status lies in the pursuit of financial stability. Many Dalit families, including the Dutt family, come from backgrounds where generations have worked in low-range degrading employment. These jobs were often assigned without choice, such as manual scavenging and other physical work. For the educated and modern age, Dalit's are breaking out from this cycle of poverty and involves entering the middle class. It means having jobs based on qualifications and merits such as becoming government officers, teachers, engineers, and doctors. It also means having the ability to buy a home, pay for quality medical care, send kids to good schools and live a life with fundamental respect and comfort.

2. Social Dignity and Recognition

In Indian Society, being seen as “Middle Class” brings a feeling of respectability and acceptance. The Dalit have been long looked down upon many matters such as no good education, language, attire, and even their conduct to fit into the middle class status. This is not done out of embarrassment but as a tactic to challenge the social image forced upon them by caste followers. Dutt recounts how she consciously modified her speech and behavior to “pass” as Non-Dalit in school and college. In order to escape the criticism, she adopted the customs of the privileged classes. Many Dalit take such actions in the hope of being treated equally and avoid being viewed as low-grade.

3. Cultural and Political Assertion

However, attaining middle-class status does not mean forgetting one’s roots. Most of the Dalit getting education and financial independence assert themselves and resist caste injustices. This is a form of cultural and political proclamation. Dalit pens books, filming movies, participating in politics, organizing and leading social movements. Dalitness is no longer a secret to be hidden, but a powerful identity to be owned, celebrated, and voiced. Dutt highlights that all these little changes are a part of a larger movement. As more and more Dalit become economically stable and socially respected, it undermines the old caste system. It demonstrates that the Dalit can live with dignity, succeed and lead, shattering the myth that their role is situated at the base of the social hierarchy.

Dutt doesn’t present these as individual goals. She demonstrates that these are a collective efforts and a way for the entire Dalit community to rise together. By entering the middle class, Dalit are not just bettering their own lives; they are also breaking caste barriers, fighting for equal rights and a more just society.

Barriers to Dalit Middle Class Mobility

In her memoir, Dutt explains that while many Dalit have worked hard to rise into the middle class through education and jobs, deep-seated caste discrimination continues to block their path to complete equality. They go beyond mere concerns of money or qualifications, social, cultural and structural systems that favor the upper castes and exclude Dalit. Dutt lays out how these barriers show up in education, employment, society and even at home.

1. Discrimination in Education and Jobs

Education played very vital role in the life of Dalit and shaping their future. It became the main way for Dalit people to educate themselves and achieves professional competence to move up in society. While reservations policies have helped Dalit students to get admissions to school, colleges and government jobs, they still face a great deal of unfair treatment and biased judgments in such places.

In schools and universities, Dalit students are often looked down upon, questioned about their intelligence and tagged as “undeserving”. Most of the teachers and classmates assume that these students got the placement only because of reservation quotas, not because of merit. This leads to bullying and self-doubt, even among the brightest students. Dalit Students frequently face exclusion from social gatherings, group projects, student clubs and friend circles. This discrimination can affect their self-esteem, academic performance, and emotional and mental health. Many drop out because of the pressure and loneliness, whereas many commit suicide.

The discrimination continues, even in the job market. Dalit professionals often find it difficult to find jobs in the private sector, especially in higher-paying jobs. Though they are equally or more qualified, they are denied or overlooked for promotions. Even in modern offices, the idea that Dalits are not “fit” for leadership or high-status jobs still exists.

Dutt shares her own experiences of hiding her Dalit identity to avoid discrimination. She believed that disclosing her caste background would cost her respect, opportunities, and friendships, despite being entirely qualified.

2. Cultural Exclusion and Social Marginalization

Despite their financial success and settlement in major urban areas, Dalits remain socially unaccepted within the upper-caste dominated middle class. They may dress, speak, and live like middle-class people, but caste still marks them as outsiders. This leads to a strange situation.

3. Lack of Generational Support

Most of the Dalit middle-class families are starting from scratch, while upper-caste, middle-class families often enjoy generational wealth and social connections. As a result, their economic position remains vulnerable.

Many Dalit in middle-class families are first generation learners and professionals. Their forebears were denied access to good education and property. Hence, they lack family savings, land, property and inheritance which would help them in the time of crisis. They often carry the burden of supporting themselves and their entire family: parents, siblings, grandparents, and extended families. There is no safety net to provide security in the event of health crisis or lose a job. Any emergency, such as a major accident, illness, or job loss, can pull back a Dalit middle-class family into poverty. Their situations are fundamentally different from those of upper caste families, who may have financial security, multiple properties, insurance, etc.

Dutt explains that economic success for Dalit is always uncertain. They constantly have to protect what they have earned as society hasn't built any support system for them. The interplay of caste and class in Indian society makes their position much more vulnerable.

A Vision for Caste-Free Social Progress

Dalit middle-class aspirations are more than just individual, they represent the struggle against equality and against justice. Dalit seek structural changes, beyond mere economic upliftments. In sharing her own experience, Dutt disrupts caste silence among the middle class in urban centers, making a case for visibility, representation and frank conversations as the engines of social change.

1. Inclusive Education System

Dalit are pushing for greater representation in academia, more inclusive curricula, and tougher policies to combat caste-based discrimination in educational institutions. They're calling for more Dalit faculty members to bring diverse perspectives into higher education. There is also a need to reform entrance examinations and selection processes to better support students from marginalized backgrounds. Dutt highlights education as an effective instrument for social transformation, stressing its importance in challenging casteist ideologies.

2. Caste-Free Workspaces and Economic Opportunities

Dalit advocates for stronger anti-discrimination policies in workplaces and more economic opportunities for lower caste communities. We need to implement affirmative action in the private sector to create spare job opportunities. It's essential to support Dalit entrepreneurs and business owners with government policies and financial help.

Dutt points out that without economic independence, social mobility can't really happen, which is why making workplaces inclusive is so important.

3. Political and Cultural Representation

Today, Dalit middle-class people are wherein they are demanding more participation in politics and a bigger space in cultural sites. It seeks no validation and challenges the hegemonic narratives by dominant caste groups through writing, social media and different artistic mediums are used to convey the realities of their daily lives. They are reclaiming their identity and shaping public discourse on caste, thanks to these mediums. Many of them are demanding the formation and support of a more powerful Dalit political party. They assert that meaningful social change has to come from within the community, leaders who know the struggles of the community and can fight for real legal and policy changes to fight caste-based discrimination and social advancement. Dutt stresses the necessity of the marginalized voices to influence the mainstream discourse and redefine the socio-political landscape of India.

Conclusion

There are legion of issues of Dalit people. Many issues are addressed by the government after forming policies, schemes and implementing those properly. The constitutional provisions safeguarded the fundamental rights of Dalit. The aspirations of socially excluded communities for achieving the middle class status and dignity of life seem challenging. It is crucial to integrate the Dalit into middle class through economic advancements and abolishing caste based discrimination at all places and at all level. Their pursuit of upward mobility encompasses identity, dignity, and the right to exist without discrimination in addition to financial stability. The research paper emphasizes some suggestive measures that the Dalit people need to have middle class status. It requires a comprehensive approach to abolish the historical and systematic disparities the Dalit people encounter. The inclusion of Dalit into education, employment and entrepreneurship as per with Non-Dalit is required. The Dalit community needs to achieve social and cultural empowerment through implementing structural reforms and require support from other communities and government. India can achieve progress in all sectors through a just and inclusive society by recognizing and removing all obstacles.

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