

Book Review

Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir by Yashica Dutt

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Rohith Vemula's suicide in January 2016 triggered a heated discussion on caste discrimination in universities in India. He was a Ph.D. scholar and an activist to raise consciousness against caste exploitation. Vemula thought that "the value of a man" was limited to the "immediate identity and nearest possibility". This incident shook several people all over the world. Three days after the suicide, a hitherto Brahmin lady admitted on social media that she had been denying her history and her responsibility to the community. Yashica Dutt stopped pretending as a Brahmin and came "out as a Dalit" to embrace and take pride in her Dalit identity.

Yashica wrote about her personal experiences in a middle-class Dalit family, the poverty of the family, her mental self-flagellation and her journey from pretension to realization. She informs us that the Dalits were deprived of education and culture and its consequences. She does not find Dalit voices in mainstream media. She saw the torture of Dalit women in the patriarchal society. She wrote about the history of the Dalit movement as well as the Dalit women's movement. She tries to answer important questions about caste and privilege. From the personal narratives of the author as well as those of other Dalits, she brings our attention to the injustices of caste against Dalits and appeals to us to stand against the insidious system.

The whole book is divided into twelve chapters. In the 'author's note', she says about the caste as "the invisible arm that turns the gears in nearly every system in our country" and nearly all-important decisions in government, media and justice system are taken by the upper

castes. In the prologue, Yashica writes about the journey of realization of her original identity as a Dalit. She was the daughter of a Brahmin mother and a Dalit father. Her grandfather had to drop his last name, a descriptor of his Dalitness because of the discrimination in society. She and her father also did the same to escape the lifelong humiliation. She pretended to be not a Dalit to find access to a space that would reject her if she was found what she really was. She was aware of the penalties for not being upper-caste- discrimination, humiliation and oppression that we often find in our society in the form of the suicide of PhD scholars and college students, rapes of young girls and women, ‘honour killings’ of lovers, asphyxiation of our manual scavengers, etc. These penalties are so rampant that they no longer shock or outrage common people in an effective way and are not highlighted in the newspapers.

Yashica finds many upper-caste people who claim themselves as not casteist but propagate it in the name of tradition and culture significantly by stressing inter-caste marriages. Matrimonial columns reflect the whole story. The news of the murder of Rohith Vemula did not do much for the convent-educated urban lady but the letter written in English left a deep impression on her mind- “My birth is my fatal accident.... Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of stardust”. She found certain similarities with this man. She believes that her good English help her keep her upper-caste status. Their education was their only strength. But unlike her, Rohith could stand proudly as a Dalit and fought for his fellow students against caste-based prejudices. Then she stopped pretending to be an upper caste, stopped being ashamed and experienced empathy. She declared that she was a Dalit on the Tumblr page. Her parents reacted with joy and caution when heard the revelation of their daughter.

She is a “witness to what it means to be Dalit in a grossly unfair society”. In the epilogue, she tells the story of a Dalit cricketer named Palwankar Baloo, who was “the only sliver of hope in an otherwise depressing tour of England in 1911” taking 114 wickets. Despite

his contribution to the Indian team, he had to face caste discrimination. Baloo was not allowed to eat with the other upper caste team members or not allowed to take tea together. But the whole Indian team played with him on the field to achieve good results. She also mentioned the name of Vinod Kambli, a cricketer who admitted to facing humiliation and discrimination for being a Dalit. She appeals to those who “have to bear its brunt” to work together to become “truly post caste”.

In the memoir, Yashica gives pithy arguments for reservation supported by facts, data and research. She makes the readers aware of the social injustices prevalent in Indian society that need to be redressed. She tells about the double marginalization of a Dalit woman as a woman and also as a Dalit. Each chapter of the book inspires the people who want to work towards making the world post-caste. She is an inspiration to those who are living in such fear at a subliminal level. She appeals to Dalit readers not to feel isolated and to use the memoir as “a handbook to fight back” whenever they are made to feel that they are innately “untalented or undeserving” due to their caste positioning in the hierarchical social order.

About the Author

Mr. Kunal Kumar Halder is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Bangabasi Morning College, Sealdah. He completed his Post Graduation in English Literature from Presidency College in 2005. He qualified for UGC NET in 2011. Presently he is a Ph.D. research scholar in the Department of English at Bankura University. His areas of interest are gender studies, partition literature and children's literature. His papers were published in various journals and he also presented papers in national and international seminars. He may be contacted at bmcengkkh2021@gmail.com.