

## Gender, (Urban) Space and Caste: Reading Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out As Dalit*

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper explores the relationship between gender, (urban) space and caste in Yashica Dutt's memoir Coming Out as Dalit. It first offers a general understanding of space and its relationship to gender in the Indian context and then specifically goes on to explore Dutt's memoir. Traditionally, Indian society was spatially divided because of the caste system which dominated and segregated the society in terms of top-down layers to the point of the so-called untouchables. Women too were relegated to the space of the home. The Dalits and the Dalit women suffered this segregation and the consequent discrimination most. The urban space provided them with an anonymity as well as opportunity apparently to pass off as upper caste and to live with confidence and success. This paper examines how this situation becomes complex proving to be both enabling and limiting. But it does it by focusing on the negotiations between gender (woman), urban space and the question of identity in terms of Dutt's testimonio. Paradoxically, the access that the urban space provides her, awakens her awareness of the need for asserting the true identity that she hid, thereby also the agency of the "Thirdspace". The paper discusses the problematics around these issues of gender, space, caste and ultimately agency emerging out of the concept of the "Thirdspace".<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** *space, gender, caste, urban space, thirdspace*

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### Understanding SPACE in the Indian context

Space and social relations are interrelated and space is generally socially constructed. It is almost always constructed out of social relations exactly as gender is. Social constructions of gender relations influence specific ways of looking at space. So, while space is not innocent of gender, gender is also not unaware of space (Datta 1). Space takes on a very complex form and shape because various aspects like power dynamics, symbols, meanings, prejudices happen to configure it. Intriguingly, it usually appears to have a concrete, static and solid feel to it, but actually it involves and exists in the cultural terrain and the realm of the mind. Hence, space and identities are interrelated, interactive, ever-changing and unrestrained. We therefore have to look at space not as something statically given but on the contrary as a social construct, being constituted through social relations, discourses and practices. Our social life, therefore, could be said to have been made of spaces. No wonder, when we think of gender, it must be understood that it is also constructed and negotiated spatially. Space, especially urban space, is the context of the present paper. It will be shown how it can be both constraining and enabling for women at the same time so far as their identities are concerned. However, while the paper will theorize on gender and space in general, to begin with, it will specifically focus on gender and (urban) space in the context of Yashica Dutt, an Indian Dalit woman and a writer, in the second part.

It is important to have the cultural and spatial contexts in order to understand how gender is shaped in India and how gender-space and patriarchy operate. Let me start by giving a well-known example- the Sabrimala Temple controversy. This incident is the perfect example of the violent nature of our cultural and social life and what happens when cultural and caste rules are broken. Despite the Supreme Court judgement in 2018 allowing all women to enter the temple irrespective of their age, conservative believers, both men and women, vehemently opposed it. The anti-woman temple-entry group claimed that only women in the non-menstrual group below 10 or over 50 could be permitted entry. Despite the Supreme Court verdict, women were denied entry to a space which should be open for all. It should be mentioned in this context that traditionally menstruating women are seen as untouchable and impure and are not given access to spaces which are considered pure. So are lower castes in general in India. Sabrimala temple is a public space which everyone should have the right of access to. Yet, the space is constructed on the prejudice about a woman's body being impure and polluting. In the Indian context, this is exactly how religion, caste and tradition segregate and create spaces for different categories of people. Even in the urban space, access to it is regulated differently for different categories of people not only for economic reasons but also by discriminating in terms of gender, caste

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and religion. Even though the urban space in India apparently provides a lot of anonymity and is seen as a liberal space different from that of the villages where the social divisions and segregations are sharp and strong, yet the divisions and segregations along the axes of caste, class and religion are very much there and have taken on newer forms with the advent of globalization and so on.

### **The spatial Structure of the Indian Society and Dalit women's position**

Traditionally Indian society is divided into separate spaces for all. The so-called lower castes or untouchables have always lived outside the main villages. While they are part of the main Hindu society, they are treated as outsiders and they are outsiders literally. Simply a touch by the untouchable community can defile people of the upper castes. Segregation is absolute and in the literal sense maintained very much like the way racial segregation is maintained. The Hindu *Varnashrama* or caste system divides people not only along caste lines, it also regulates one's access to economic resources, access to educational spaces and access to various public spaces. In the Indian context the only person who has access to most of all spaces is the upper-caste, upper-class heterosexual man. All other bodies, that is women in general and the untouchables in particular, are suspect and have to be controlled. Hence sexuality of the upper-caste woman is controlled and endogamy is practiced to maintain caste purity. Dalit women are marginalized at many levels – by virtue of both caste and gender discrimination. The caste system is basically patriarchal; social restrictions, religious rituals and cultural ideologies are used to control the lives of women in general. Caste and patriarchy are synonymous in the Indian context and violence is ingrained in the control as well as discrimination and oppression. In the Indian context, violence against Dalit women demands special mention. It can be categorised according to the following broad headings: violence because of the lowly nature of occupation, verbal abuse, physical abuse and violence, sexual violence (molestation, rape and other forms of violence), epistemological violence (representation) and systemic violence. In 1981 the number of rapes on Dalit women by the so-called upper castes was 604 while in 2013 the number increased uncontrollably to 2073, claims the National Crime Record Bureau, Ministry of Home affairs, Government of India. (source: Atwal 148)

### **The Cultural Context of Space: the upper-caste context**

With colonialism modernity also was introduced to India and India started moving from a traditional society to a more modern one. The woman question became especially a complex one at this point of time with traditional and modern values at loggerheads with each other. Our nationalist leader tackled the question of westernization and our submission to it by relegating our women to the realm of the spiritual which was supposed to have remained unaffected. Emasculation and the feeling of inferiority in the face of an apparently powerful materialistic culture which critiqued our practices towards our women proved difficult to deal with. Hence the most strategic thing to do here was to divide space into world and home, material and spiritual and relegate women to the latter. Hence, the “feminine” embodied the “spiritual values” and the “essence” of India. The material realm thus became the realm of the colonisers- the West and the westernized culture. This is the outside world. The realm of the home or the inner world was considered the realm of women. Partha Chatterjee states that this burden of the spiritual on women consequent on the spatial division de-politicized the woman question. As Seemanthini Niranjana in her book *Gender and Space* pertinently says, “The socio-political demarcation effected by the nationalist discourse- into home and world, spiritual and material, female and male – further facilitated a moral discourse hinging particularly on the qualities of womanhood and female virtues” (Niranjana 40). With independence the emphasis shifted to development. Women's education, economic roles and employment patterns became important questions. However, while these initiatives are necessary, an understanding only of the material basis of women's subordination is not enough. It is important to understand what it is to be a “female” and what “femaleness” means in the cultural and symbolic realm, argues Niranjana.

An examination of the Nirbhaya rape case will tell us how a woman is perceived both materially and symbolically in the Indian context. After the Nirbhaya Rape case which rocked the world in 2012, the BBC made a film called *India's Daughter* in which the accused admitted that they would not have hurt the victim so badly had she not resisted so much. Her physical fight with them and her resistance pushed them to prove their masculinity because women traditionally don't fight back. While the violence of men on them is “acceptable”, the resistance of women is not! In an interview, the accused expressed a strong desire to teach a lesson to the victim for transgressions. In fact, the woman's very presence in the public space is itself a transgression so deep that it is worthy of being punished by sexual violence! This violence, it can be asserted, comes from this deep-rooted tradition of the division of space between men and women into public and private, as Sushmita Dasgupta opines in her essay “The Nirbhaya Murder Case: Women as the Oddity in Public Transport”

## **II**

### **Coming out As Dalit: Caste, Women and Violence**

*Coming Out As Dalit* is a personal account of Yashica Dutt, a young and dynamic writer, based in New York as a journalist who writes on gender, identity and culture. She was previously a principal correspondent

with the *Brunch* and the *Hindustan Times* and is the founder of *Documents of Dalit Discrimination*. She received the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar for the book in the English category for the year 2020. But her origin, upbringing and struggle refer back to India where the space in which she was defined was that of a Dalit woman from the so-called untouchable Bhangi community of Rajasthan, India. She describes in her memoir as referred to above her experience of what it meant to be an untouchable even in the apparently modern urban spaces in India. She refers to the social and cultural discriminations and her performativity how to overcome the hurdles she or her community constantly faced:

But to escape discrimination and become part of society, which is still mostly upper-caste, we have to leave some of our Dalitness behind. We leave behind our food, our songs, our culture and our last names, so we can be 'better' and 'purer', more upper caste and less Dalit. We don't leave our Dalitness behind just so that we can blend in more easily. We do it because sometimes that's our only option. We change our last names so we can get jobs and rent houses. We lie about our caste so our friends, classmates and teachers don't think we are lesser than them. We learn their habits so no one can use our Dalitness to make fun of us. (Dutt 181)

After spending most of her life going through a self-imposed exile to hide her Bhangi (manual scavenging) identity and 'passing off' as a non-Dalit, Yashica Dutt first decided to "come out as a Dalit" after she saw a Facebook post about a "boy called Rohit Vemula" who had died by suicide in the University of Hyderabad. Vemula in his very eloquent letter written in English had said: "My birth is my fatal accident." Reading his letter, written in impeccable English, Dutt was struck by the similarities between herself and Rohit. Like her, English, the language of power, was Rohit's crutch too and perhaps he wanted to use it to take on those who equated his Dalitness to an inherent sub-humanness. The only difference between Dutt and Rohit, felt Dutt, was that, "Unlike me Rohit did nothing to bury his Dalitness. Instead, he used it as a shield to stand up for his fellow students in Hyderabad University against the caste-based prejudice of members of the administration" (Dutt XV). This motivated Dutt to come out as a Dalit, no more subjected but as a subject. She realized that her performativity to hide her caste or her use of the anonymity as an individual in the metropolis was only a cowardly self-deception, shirking of moral responsibility vis-à-vis her community that still suffers discrimination and humiliation. Rohith Vemula's words shocked her into realization of this reality. Dutt says that her life has been a constant negotiation with her caste identity. In fact, it has been a constant hustle for identity construction. Since childhood, with the help of her mother, they created a false reality for themselves. Deliberately and determinedly, they cultivated and put on upper-caste manners and mannerisms to hide their real caste. The fallout of it had been a life of constant fear, the fear of getting discovered, caught and shamed, "the fear of being caught, the fear of losing friends, respect and even my bylines" (Dutt xv). The shame and sense of inferiority at being a 'bhangi' had been so great that Dutt felt her 'Dalitness' was like a heavy carcass that she carried on her back while she pretended to be an upper caste for ten years. This was nothing but violence towards the self. Take a note of how Yashica Dutt's mother dressed up- stylish, upper class and sophisticated to look different from the poverty stricken and deprived lower-caste women and the society she belonged to:

For us- Mum, Dad and me- the city presented the perfect platform to transcend our caste... I remember watching her get ready, her eighties style perm luminous under the fluorescent mirror light, as she applied dark metallic eye-shadow. Sometimes she wore tiny kitten heels... movie nights, occasional eating out, socializing with dad's few friends were among our weekly rituals. They mimicked the upper-middleclass habits of the early nineties, even when our financial situation didn't. They were a curated performance designed mostly by our aspiration to break out of our lower caste. (Dutt 19- 20)

Birthday parties were celebrated with a lot of pomp and show so much so that even those were an assertion that they were equals of the upper castes or were upper castes. Dutt's mother put a lot of emphasis on the English Language. They were encouraged to speak English impeccably. Being able to speak in English without any trace of regional accent is also a mark of wealth, pedigree, class and even intelligence in modern India. Most Dalits and even non-Dalits in India, due to lack of resources and good schooling, cannot speak that kind of English. This need to escape the overpowering Dalit identity that we see here can be further understood if we take Suraj Yangde's experience into account. Suraj Yangde is another young and dynamic Dalit intellectual who has emerged as a new voice today. He says, "I am not a human, I am a Dalit. I am not a colleague, I am a Dalit. I am not a friend; I am a Dalit. I am not a co-maker of the moment; I am a Dalit." (Yangde 40) Later in the Memoir, Dutt expresses similar sentiments and says that she had to make this supreme effort to hide her caste. Otherwise all her achievements would be conveniently forgotten, and her Dalit identity and that she is a reserved category student would take predominance. Yangde's experience in a foreign country will clinch the point. As he says in his memoir *Caste Matters*:

During my studies in the UK, I would spend time with fellow Indians. We had healthy interactions and even cooked dinners together. In a land far from home, my Indian friends who spoke and ate like me provided endearing comfort. However, two months into these friendships, the same people began to distance themselves.

I used to put up posts on Facebook condemning the caste system for atrocities against Dalits. As soon as my updates started to show up on their timelines, some of them blocked me, while those who were relatively closer to me did not engage with the posts. (43)

This is how caste violence is also perpetually present and takes various insidious forms in the urban space. It is not always blatant physical violence. Violence itself takes a layered and psychological form, oppressive in subtle forms eluding others' sensitivity and empathy. Speaking on similar lines, Praveena Thali, a research scholar in Women's Studies gives an important example in this respect:

The present tendency in India is to confine discussing Dalit women's issues only to sexual violence that they experience, whereas the myriad other oppressions are not heard of. Why is it that only physical violence against Dalit women is acknowledged and not the humiliating attacks on their intellectual capacity? This is an important question to be debated.

Universities are a part of the larger society, and it thus follows that the societal prejudices will find a place in these universities too. Doubts cast on their intelligence and capabilities are present forms of caste discrimination faced by Dalit women. Violence should not be stereotyped as relating only to sexual or physical violence. This leads to the neglect of the attack on Dalit women inside the academia" (Dalitweb.org)

This is what could be called intellectual violence in the urban space. Arti K after interviewing five Dalit women who work in the Developmental sector wrote an article in *Feminism in India* where she says that the violence faced is very subtle sometimes. When women especially Dalit women enter intellectual work spaces, this move itself is seen as challenging the caste system. Sonali Mhaske who has worked for 4 years as Research Assistant said that she worked in rural areas to collect data but the theorising was always done by the upper-caste colleagues (feminismindia.com). Being a Dalit woman and rising to positions of leadership in offices is also not without great hurdles because of these deep-rooted caste prejudices. The greatest hurdle that the Dalit women have to overcome is the psychological one, the psychology of inferiority instilled into them down the ages, first as woman and then as Dalit, a phenomenon of double discrimination.

However, the urban space is a complex category. If it is constraining, it can also be enabling in other ways. Yashica Dutt is a case in point. While she had to put up an elaborate performance to survive in this elite urban space, it has contributed to her efforts and has also been enabling in many ways. The elaborate performance as an upper-caste and the urban education she acquired gave her an exclusive privilege of another kind, privilege usually enjoyed by the upper castes and upper class by virtue of being rich and powerful. As she says:

Stephen's stamp (college), which afforded me a different kind of reservation.... I would get into exclusive alumni networks and groups and discover jobs that are often only advertised in these closed groups. Hiring tactics like these are common to the IITs and IIMs, but very few undergraduate colleges in India besides St. Stephen's can claim the recognition and reach of its alumni network. (92-93)

After this there was really no looking back for Dutt. Did this elaborate performance to look upper caste really help her? Of course, it did. It gave her access to spaces where otherwise she would never get entry as a lower-caste woman.

### **Coming Out: Escaping trauma/violence towards the self & reclaiming the space**

"Coming out" is important over here because Dutt is coming out from being a marginalized woman to being a powerful agent, both as a woman and as a Dalit. While at one point of time, she felt that hiding her true identity would protect her from the ridicule of the society, she soon realised that the lie is nothing but a burden. True freedom will come when she can embrace her true identity by way of acknowledging it in terms of the politics of difference. Columbia University acted as that enabling space which helped her come out. Here at the Columbia University, where students of other marginalised communities spoke about their discrimination freely and courageously and everyone listened in an encouraging manner, Yashica Dutt too felt encouraged to come out. As Michel Foucault has argued, "...these links between space, knowledge, power and cultural politics must be seen as both oppressive and enabling, filled not only with authoritarian perils but also with possibilities for community resistance and emancipatory change." (Soja 87) Dutt's experience with the urban space has been both oppressive and enabling. To use a Foucauldian term again, she has used the "new technologies of power" available to her in the urban space to gain agency. It is this urban space that has also helped her connect with other marginalised people and universalize her discourse. She used the social media and started *Documents of Dalit Discrimination*. Dalit people could freely tell their stories and personal experiences without fear or shame.

The same narrative of the performance of passing in the urban space has been seen amongst the Black people. In fact, it has always been more prevalent amongst the Black people. Yashica Dutt is the first amongst the Dalit writers to dwell on the discourse of "coming out" even though "passing" as performance has remained for ages to escape shame. However, these caste performances make an eye-opening revelation for them as well as others. It has been noticed both in case of the so-called lower caste people and the Black people that this kind of transcendence is achieved mostly through elaborate cultural and social performances, a fact which ultimately points to the genealogy and ideology of the caste division itself as nothing but a social construct. This understanding of social division and discrimination as discursive and as social construct is enabling not only in terms of performativity but on that very score also to perform a politics of difference to acquire the necessary agency to confront and challenge the problematic and subvert it, for true identity could be achieved in no other



way. One has to come out! Yashica Dutt performed a caste performance for passing but that was self-deception and hence self-demeaning and traumatizing. It was a violence at many levels. She achieved her true identity by coming out as Dalit by countering and exposing that violence.

**(Urban) space/ Thirdspace/Agency/Space as a Discourse**

Urban space is a hybrid space. It is characterised by change, flux and transformation, something which Bhabha calls hybridity in the context of culture. It makes space for enunciation or enunciative practice understood as an uninterrupted process of performance without the so-called closure of énoncé. It offers the necessary liberatory discursive strategy. This enunciatory present is for him the “in-between”, “hybrid” or “thirdspace”, as he asserts:

But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitutes it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Rutherford, 211)

Since culturespace as the in-between space is about ever changing and ever transforming processes and not something really static, given or “pure”, Yashica Dutt could use this very fluidity of culture to re-fashion herself first as a Brahmin and then go back to a more empowered Dalit self. As an urban Dalit woman, Dutt occupies what bell hooks like Bhabha also calls the “Thirdspace.” She occupies this Thirdspace because she is both margin and centre, outsider and insider, at the same time to the larger Hindu society and has the privilege of looking at the society from perspectives unknown to her oppressors. Talking of this “Thirdspace” bell hooks in her book *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* calls marginality itself the location of radical openness. Shesays:

I am located in the margin. I make definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and marginality that one chooses as a site of resistance- as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in the segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to know this space through suffering, pain and struggle. We are transformed individually, collectively, as we make radical creative spaces which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world. (qtd. in Soja 105)

One can make a conscious choice to be part of this “Thirdspace”- all progressive women and men can, not to speak of the Dalits and Blacks alone, in the interest of social change.

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