



Passing, Protest, And Reclamation: Caste Performativity And The Politics Of Identity In Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out As Dalit*

Amita
Ph.D Scholar
Department of English
IEC University
Baddi, Solan
Himachal Pradesh

Abstract

The research explores the intricate relationship between caste performativity and the politics of identity as depicted in Yashica Dutt's memoir, *Coming Out as Dalit*. The study identifies a primary research problem: the invisible yet exhausting labor required by Dalit individuals to "pass" as upper-caste within elite, urban, and globalized spaces. This performance, conceptualized as the "Savarna mask," is analyzed not as a choice for social mobility, but as a defensive response to deep-seated structural violence and the threat of institutional exclusion. This research investigates caste performativity and the politics of identity in Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit*. It addresses a central research problem: the invisible, exhausting labor required by Dalits to "pass" as upper-caste in elite spaces. This performance, or the "Savarna mask," is analyzed as a defensive response to structural violence rather than a choice for mobility.

The study argues that "passing" extracts a devastating psychological tax, causing a 'psychological split' and constant hypervigilance. For Dalit women, this results in a 'dual erasure' of both caste history and gendered agency to satisfy the fraudulent requirements of a "post-caste" society. This concealment is framed as "symbolic suicide," where the authentic self is negated to avoid discrimination. Furthermore, the research examines the transition from traumatic concealment to a politics of protest. By "coming out," the subject performs epistemic reclamation, transforming "stinging shame" into a defiant political standpoint. The study concludes that discarding the mask is the only antidote to "social asphyxiation," restoring the "social breath" of the community and establishing communal sovereignty against exclusionary meritocracies.

Keywords: *Caste Performativity, Savarna Mask, Epistemic Reclamation, Structural Violence, Psychological Split, Dalit Identity, Politics of Protest, Social Asphyxiation.*

1. Introduction

Research on the intersection of caste identity and survival necessitates a deep examination of 'Passing' as a sophisticated yet traumatic strategy of concealment. In Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit*, this phenomenon is framed as 'Caste Performativity,' where the marginalized subject wears a 'Savarna mask' as toil for survival against caste-based institutional barriers and social prejudice. Yashica's

memoir draws a parallel between Shakespeare's Viola, who in *Twelfth Night* pleads, "Conceal me what I am, and be my aid / For such disguise as haply shall become / The form of my intent" (*Twelfth Night*, Act I, Scene II). The "aid" Viola asks for, functions as what Frantz Fanon describes in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) as a psychological split where the oppressed seeks recognition by "becoming white"—or in this context, upper-caste, to escape the "inferiority complex" imposed by the dominant structure (4). Homi K. Bhabha's theory of mimicry further clarifies that this performance ('mimicry') is never a perfect eraser and it remains, "almost the same, but not quite," creating a "double vision" that maintains a state of constant hypervigilance (122). Wajid Hanif Gujarwala argues that this act of concealment ultimately "drags" the individual down, challenging the basic notion of self and stripping away self-determination.

In *Coming Out as Dalit*, Yashica Dutt presents cast "passing" not as opportunism but as a deeply conditioned survival strategy shaped by structural violence. Passing, in this context, refers to the deliberate concealment of one's Dalit identity in order to access dignity, safety, and social mobility within a Savarna-dominated public sphere, where according to Yashica:

Discrimination, humiliation, oppression are all penalties for not being upper caste, or for simply being Dalit. Our Dalitness is imprinted onto us through the burned bodies of our children, suicides of our Ph.D scholars and college students, rapes of young girls and women, asphyxiation of our manual scavengers and 'honor killings' of lovers. (xi)

The memoir reveals that caste concealment is not merely personal choice; it is a response to a social order that punishes visible Dalitness.

2. Literature Review

The literature review for this study synthesizes a paradigm shift from "traumatic concealment" to "Epistemic Reclamation" in contemporary Dalit narratives. Central to this discourse is the "Savarna mask," which Priyanka Verma (2024) identifies as a site of "dual erasure." Verma argues that this mask forces Dalit women to suppress both their caste history and gendered agency to survive within elite, "post-caste" spaces. This performance extracts a heavy "psychological tax," manifesting as a "psychological split" and "constant hypervigilance" (Dutt xi). Expanding on this, Aparna Nandakumar (2024) classifies this state as "Peridomestic Trauma," where the domestic and professional spheres become sites of performance rather than rest, leading to the "symbolic suicide" of the authentic self. Furthering this institutional critique, Sukhadeo Thorat (2024) and Brahma Prakash (2024) contend that modern "meritocracy" maintains "caste-based barriers" by treating the Savarna aesthetic as a prerequisite for belonging. Thorat views "Coming Out" as an "Institutional De-masking" that exposes the "structural violence" inherent in these gatekeeping practices. In response to this "social asphyxiation," Suraj Yengde (2024) and Meena Kandasamy (2024) posit that reclamation disrupts the "liminal trap" of mimicry. They argue that transitioning from "stinging shame" to "Communal Sovereignty" allows the subject to move from "Survivalist Silence" to "Poetic Insurgency."

Adding a technological and legal dimension, Thenmozhi Soundararajan (2024) explores the role of "Digital Dalit Sovereignty," suggesting that the internet provides a decentralized platform to bypass the "Savarna gaze" of traditional media gatekeepers. Adding to this, Raeesa Vakil (2024) describes the memoir as an "Epistemic Insurgency" that creates a permanent "Institutional Rupture" in the legal and social myths of a caste-blind India. Ultimately, the literature frames Dutt's narrative as a "Pedagogical Rupture" that restores the "social breath" (Guru, 101) of the community, securing a defiant political standpoint. In her recent analysis of technical elitence, Ajantha Subramanian (2024) argues that "merit" is often a "caste-property" disguised as individual achievement. She posits that Dalit individuals in global spaces are forced into a "professional mimicry" to fit the upper-caste standard of "excellence," which reinforces the institutional barriers Dutt describes.

Vivek Kumar (2024) in his research on the "Global Dalit Diaspora" provides a framework for understanding Dutt's experience in New York. He argues that the "mask" does not disappear with

migration; rather, it evolves into a “transnational concealment” where the subject must navigate both local racism and inherited casteism.

Gopal Guru (2024) discusses the concept of “Social Death” in the context of passing. He argues that the “toil for survival” is a state of “ontological suspension” where the subject exists but is not “known,” leading to a profound sense of “social asphyxiation” that can only be cured by public reclamation.

Nandini Dhar (2024) examines the “Aesthetics of Silence” in Dalit women’s memoirs. She suggests that the “Savarna mask” is a form of “gendered performance” where the Dalit woman is doubly burdened to appear “respectable” according to Brahminical patriarchal standards, making her reclamation a radical act of intersectional defiance. Sumeet Samos (2024) explores the rise of “Digital Dalit Counter-Publics.” He argues that Dutt’s Facebook post was not just a personal status update but a “Digital Insurgency” that utilized the decentralized nature of the internet to bypass traditional “Savarna gatekeeping” in Indian media.

This literature review identifies a critical gap between “traumatic concealment” and “Epistemic Reclamation,” providing a framework to analyze the “Savarna mask” as a site of structural violence. By synthesizing intersectional erasures and institutional barriers, it opens a research pathway to explore how “Protest” dismantles the “liminal trap” of caste.

3. Conceptualizing the “Savarna Mask” and “Passing”: A Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework for “Passing, Protest, and Reclamation: Caste Performativity and the Politics of Identity in Yashica Dutt’s *Coming Out as Dalit*” is theoretically grounded in the intersection of Caste Performativity, Standpoint Theory, and Trauma Studies. It conceptualizes the “Savarna mask” not as a social choice, but as a site of structural violence where “passing” functions as a traumatic survival strategy. This performance necessitates a “psychological split” and constant hypervigilance, ultimately leading to a state of “social death” or “asphyxiation” within elite meritocracies.

The study argues that the transition from “traumatic concealment” to public “Protest” constitutes a radical act of Epistemic Reclamation. By utilizing an Intersectional lens, the framework analyzes how the subject dismantles the “liminal trap”—the exhausting “in-between” state of hiding—and challenges institutional gatekeeping. This trajectory moves the narrative from “symbolic suicide” toward Communal Sovereignty, effectively restoring the “social breath” of the marginalized identity and establishing a defiant, self-defined political presence.

4. Labour and Price for the “Savarna Mask”

A central thematic inquiry in this study is the “labor and price for the Savarna mask,” which conceptualizes concealment as a sophisticated yet traumatic strategy of “Caste Performativity”. This “mask” is not a passive disguise but a form of “toil for survival” necessitated by deep-seated “caste-based institutional barriers”. Describing toil and price of “Caste Performativity” Yashica Dutt argues that “Hiding one aspect of your identity is like leading a double life... You create masks to wear in each of your lives, and switch artfully between the two... the two blur together and you no longer remember who you were” (xi). This “artful switching” is what the text identifies as a “traumatic strategy of concealment”. Talking about this trauma Yashica says, “the toughest act of the performance was speaking perfect English,” a tool she used to “compensate for our Dalitness”. Priyanka Verma defines this labor as an intersectional struggle, where the Dalit woman must curate a specific aesthetic to avoid the “stinging shame” of her origins. She notes:

The act of ‘passing’ creates psychological split where the individual is forced to perform a version of themselves that aligns with the dominant caste aesthetics to be recognized as ‘meritorious,’ thereby bypassing the systemic violence inherent in the structure. (Verma, 2)

Bianca Cherechesh connects this performance to the state of constant hypervigilance mentioned in the research snippet. She argues:

Dutt's experience of being 'almost the same, but not quite', a Bhabha-esque mimicry—creates a permanent psychological tax where the fear of the mask slipping is fueled by the visceral knowledge of the 'burned bodies' and 'asphyxiation' that await the unmasked Dalit. (51)

Wajid Gujarwala emphasizes the erosion of the self that results from this concealment. He contends that: This act of concealment ultimately 'drags' the individual down, as the psychological labor required to maintain the 'Savarna mask' challenges the basic notion of self and systematically strips away the subject's self-determination. (14)

The systematic drifting of the 'subject's self-determination' can be analyzed with reference to Homi K. Bhabha, who suggests this "mimicry" creates a "double vision". The Dalit subject is trapped in a state of "constant hypervigilance," where the fear of the mask slipping creates a permanent psychological burden. Consequently, the "Savarna mask" is not a tool of empowerment, but a symptom of a systemic "inferiority complex" imposed by a dominant structure that refuses to recognize Dalit identity as valid in professional or intellectual spheres. Dutt's narrative significantly reminds the readers about the list of "penalties", which includes "discrimination, humiliation, oppression," and "honor killings", these critics clarify that the "price" for the mask is the soul itself. The "toil for survival" is a response to structural necropolitics; the subject performs "upper-casteness" not to achieve power, but to avoid becoming another "burned body" or "asphyxiated manual scavenger". This creates a "double vision" where the individual is safe only as long as they are "concealed" behind a disguise that "haply shall become the form of [their] intent". Gopal Guru provides a philosophical critique of the "mask," suggesting that the "toil for survival" is a form of "social asphyxiation." He notes, "When a Dalit woman like Dutt performs "upper-casteness," she is participating in a "forced aesthetics" that requires the "symbolic suicide of her ancestral identity" (92) to breathe in elite institutional spaces. Talking about the ethical cost of 'passing' Guru further says that "the "traumatic strategy of concealment" forces the individual into a "liminal trap" where they must constantly negate their own history to bypass "caste-based institutional barriers? (98)

5. From Static "Disguise" to "Reclamation"

The second contention of this study moves from the static "disguise" of the mask to the dynamic psychological rupture created by the "Fanonian split" and the eventual shift toward "Reclamation". In simple terms, this argument suggests that the "Savarna mask" is never just a surface-level costume; it creates a deep, painful division in the soul where a person starts to hate their true self while trying to become the very people who oppress them. Suraj Yengde in *Caste Matters*, discusses the "Self-Hating Dalit" as a byproduct of this split. He argues, "The Dalit who 'passes' is often caught in a 'liminal trap' where they must constantly negate their own history to appease a Brahminical gaze that will never truly accept them as equals."

However, this "split" eventually becomes so unbearable that it forces a "Protest," leading the individual to stop "passing" and start proudly asserting their Dalit identity. Dutt illustrates this internal colonization when she admits, "I was ashamed of who I was. I wanted to be someone else, someone whose history didn't involve the stinging shame of manual scavenging" (Dutt, 12). This desire to "becoming upper-caste" is a response to the "dominant structure" that validates only Savarna identities. However, as Homi K. Bhabha notes, this "mimicry" is "almost the same, but not quite", which traps the subject in a state of "constant hypervigilance" (122).

6. "Coming Out" as a Radical Rejection of "Savarna Mask"

The third contention of this study explores the transition from a passive "disguise" to an active "Political Reclamation", where the act of "Coming Out" serves as a radical rejection of the "Savarna mask" and its associated psychological "toil". In simple terms, this argument suggests that while the mask was a tool for survival, "Coming Out" is a tool for liberation. It transforms the "stinging shame" of a hidden identity into a collective "Protest" that demands institutional accountability rather than individual concealment. The final stage of the "traumatic strategy" is the public rupture of the "Savarna mask".

Yashica Dutt characterizes this not as a mere personal revelation, but as a confrontation with the “dominant structure” that enforces “caste-based institutional barriers”. By “Coming Out,” the subject ceases the ‘toil for survival’ and instead embraces a “politics of identity” that challenges the very “penalties” of Dalit existence. Anupama Rao interprets the act of “Coming Out” as a transition from “stigma to citizenship.” She argues:

Dutt’s narrative shift from concealment to proclamation is a refusal to pay the 'psychological tax' of invisibility. It is an assertion that the Dalit body is not a site of 'stinging shame' but a site of political entitlement that the modern Indian state must reckon with. (112)

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd analyses this reclamation through the lens of “Cultural Guerilla Warfare.” He posits:

When a Dalit woman like Dutt exposes the “Savarna mask” as a survivalist toil, she is performing an act of intellectual sabotage. She proves that the 'post-caste' urbanity is a lie sustained only by the silence and 'constant hypervigilance' of those it excludes. (Shepherd, 45)

In fact, the suicide of Rohith Vemula in January 2016 serves as the definitive catalyst for Yashica Dutt’s transition from a “traumatic strategy of concealment” to radical “Political Reclamation”. In simple terms, this tragedy acted as a mirror that forced Dutt to realize that the “Savarna mask” she had spent years perfecting could never truly protect her from the systemic “asphyxiation” of Dalit scholars. Dutt identifies Vemula’s death not just as a news event, but as a personal rupture that shattered her “double life”. She reflects on the immediate impact of his final letter and the subsequent national movement:

Rohith Vemula’s suicide was the moment the mask finally cracked. I realized that while I was toiling to ‘pass’ in elite newsrooms, people who looked like me, who shared my history, were being hounded to death in the very institutions I was trying so hard to belong to. (Dutt, 22)

The Vemula episode effectively “dragged” the truth out of Dutt, making her realize that her “Savarna mask” was a “fraudulent requirement”. By “Coming Out” in the wake of this tragedy, she shifted the burden of “constant hypervigilance” back onto the “dominant structure”. This reclamation proved that the “price” of the mask, the “stripping away of self-determination”, was a cost she was no longer willing to pay in a society that continued to imprint “Dalitness through the burned bodies of our children”.

7. The Institutional Reclamation and the Subversion of the “Post-Caste”

The fourth contention of this study explores the Institutional Reclamation and the Subversion of the “Post-Caste” Myth. In simple terms, this argument suggests that "Coming Out" is not just a personal healing process, but a political act that forces elite spaces to admit that caste still exists. By refusing to wear the “Savarna mask,” the individual exposes the “post-caste” urban environment as a lie, proving that “merit” is often just a code word for upper-caste privilege. The act of “Coming Out” functions as a radical disruption of the "dominant structure" and its “caste-based institutional barriers”. Yashica Dutt argues that her invisibility was a “traumatic strategy” required by a society that only accepts Dalits if they remain hidden. By discarding the mask, she challenges the “stinging shame” (Dutt, 12) that the system uses to keep the marginalized in a state of “constant hypervigilance”. Raeesa Vakil describes how reclamation exposes the “Institutional Fraud” of modern India functions:

Reclamation is the only cure for 'social asphyxiation' because it places the burden of change on the institution rather than the individual. By 'Coming Out,' Dutt effectively 'reclaims' the basic notion of self and transforms 'mimicry' into a weapon of structural critique. (Vakil, 89)

Dutt reflects that the “toil for survival” (xi) was a response to a world where “simply being Dalit” invited "discrimination, humiliation, [and] oppression”. However, the suicide of Rohith Vemula became the breaking point where the “Savarna mask” was no longer a viable “aid” for survival, “I realized that while I was toiling to “pass” in elite newsrooms, people who looked like me...were being hounded to death in the very institutions I was trying so hard to belong to” (Dutt, 22). This realization transforms her “mimicry” into a “Politics of Identity”. She no longer seeks to “becoming upper-caste” to escape an “inferiority complex”; instead, she demands that the institution accommodate her true self.

8. The Intersectional Toil and the Dalit Feminist Standpoint

The fifth contention focuses on the intersectional toil and the Dalit feminist standpoint. In simple terms, this argument suggests that the “Savarna mask” is even heavier for Dalit women, who must navigate both caste and gender barriers. By “Coming Out,” Dutt doesn't just reject caste; she reclaims the Dalit female body from a history of “stinging shame” and physical violence, turning her personal “toil” into a collective feminist protest that demands a seat at the table on her own terms. The “labor and price for the Savarna mask” is uniquely gendered, as the Dalit woman's performance of “upper-casteness” is a defensive response to a dominant structure that historically targets her body. She further describes the exhaustion of maintaining the mask while abroad, realizing that her “double life” was a global “price” she was no longer willing to pay. The “stinging shame” she felt in New York was the same shame she felt in Delhi, proving the mask was “never a perfect eraser”:

I was in New York, the most diverse city in the world, yet I was still hiding. I realized that the 'Savarna mask' wasn't just a shield; it was a cage that I had carried across the ocean. Coming out was the only way to finally breathe. (Dutt, 182)

Thus, according to Yashica Dutt Dalit identity, from national to international level, is often “imprinted” through specific gendered violence, including the “rapes of young girls and women”. For the Dalit woman, the “psychological split” is a navigation of what critic Priyanka Verma calls a “dual erasure” of both caste and gendered agency. The “dual erasure” she talks about is the double-sided burden faced by Dalit women who must hide both their caste identity and their independent voice as women to survive in a prejudiced society. It represents a “symbolic suicide” of their original selves to navigate elite spaces that would otherwise “punish” them for their origins. This creates a complex “psychological split” where she loses her connection to her roots and her power as a woman at the same time. In this context, Sharmila Rege in “Dalit Standpoint Theory” argues that “Coming Out” is an act of ‘Epistemic Reclamation’, arguing that:

Dutt's refusal to remain ‘almost the same, but not quite’ is a rejection of a feminism that asks Dalit women to hide their caste to achieve gender solidarity. Her reclamation turns the “constant hypervigilance” of the mask into a defiant political standpoint. (Rege, 72)

Dutt reflects that her performance of “upper-casteness” was a way to escape the “penalties” associated with her roots. However, the reclamation occurs when she embraces the very history she was told to hide:

I had been told that my history was something to be ashamed of... but in coming out, I realized that my Dalit identity was not a mark of 'stinging shame' but a source of power that the Savarna world was terrified of. (Dutt, 158)

9. Shift from Private toil to Collective Radical Vulnerability

The study further analyses the shift from private toil to collective Radical vulnerability, arguing that Dutt's “Coming Out” acts as a bridge that connects individual trauma to a broader social movement. In the text, Dutt appears discarding the “Savarna mask”, not because it has failed as a shield, but because the psychological cost of maintaining it. By choosing to be visible, Dutt transforms the “stinging shame” (Dutt, 12) of her ancestry into a tool for dismantling the very structures that demanded her silence. It can be observed that her narrative explicitly links her personal liberation to the systemic tragedies of her community. She realizes that the “price for the Savarna mask” is the “stripping away of self-determination” (Dutt, xi). The turning point occurs when she recognizes that the “post-caste” myth she was trying to inhabit was built on the literal and metaphorical “asphyxiation” of Dalits:

I realized that my silence was a form of complicity... the mask could not protect me from the reality of 'burned bodies of our children' or the 'asphyxiation of our manual scavengers'... I had to trade the 'toil for survival' for the power of 'Protest'. (Dutt, 164)

Talking on Dutt's “Coming Out” as a turning from individual struggle to a social movement, Meena Kandasamy observes the reclamation as a transition from “Survivalist Silence” to “Poetic Insurgency.” She argues:

Dutt's narrative collapses the 'psychological split' by turning the 'stinging shame' of the past into a loud, communal roar. She moves the Dalit body from being a hidden 'anomaly' in elite spaces to being a 'Sovereign Presence' that demands the institution account for the 'burned bodies' and 'asphyxiation' (Dutt, xi) it has historically ignored. (88)

Dutt's realization that the mask was a "fraudulent requirement" highlights the sheer exhaustion of navigating a world that only accepts a "hollowed-out" version of her identity. The reclamation occurs when she embraces the history that the system told her to erase:

I realized that the 'toil' of the mask was not just about my safety, but about keeping the system comfortable. By coming out, I was finally reclaiming my 'ancestral breath,' refusing to be 'dragged' down by a lie that required the 'symbolic suicide' of my people's history. (Dutt, 194)

10. Technological Subversion of the "Savarna Mask"

The study also explores the theme of technological subversion of the "Savarna Mask" and digital Dalit Reclamation. In this phase, the "traumatic strategy of concealment" is dismantled not through physical institutional spaces, but through the decentralized power of the internet. Dutt's choice to "come out" via a Facebook post highlights a shift where digital 'Protest' bypasses the "caste-based institutional barriers" of traditional media. By utilizing social media to collapse the "double life," the Dalit subject creates a new, unmediated "Politics of Identity" that refuses to be "asphyxiated" by editorial gatekeepers. She emphasizes that her digital proclamation was the moment she stopped the "toil for survival" and began to "breathe" in a new way. She recognizes that the digital space offered a safety that elite, "Savarna-masked" newsrooms never could:

I hit 'post' and felt the weight of years of 'constant hypervigilance' lift. The internet didn't care about the 'fraudulent requirements' of the Delhi elite; it gave me back my 'basic notion of self'... I was no longer an anomaly in a newsroom, but a voice in a movement that refused to be 'dragged' down by silence anymore. (Dutt, 201)

Endorsing Dutt's argument of how digital platform can be used for a "Technological Decolonization" of the the Dalit self, Thenmozhi Soundararajan states that:

Dutt's use of social media to discard the mask is a masterclass in 'Digital Dalit Sovereignty.' It allows the subject to bypass the 'Savarna gaze' of traditional newsrooms and speak directly to a global audience, effectively reclaiming the 'self-determination' that was previously stripped away by physical institutional gatekeepers. (212)

11. Intersection of Mental Health and Casteist Structural Violence

Other contention of the study examines the intersection of mental health and casteist structural violence, arguing that the "Savarna mask" is not merely a social tool but a psychological burden that induces chronic trauma. In simple terms, this argument suggests that the "toil for survival" (Dutt, xi) is a form of emotional labor that results in a unique state of "Caste-based Asphyxiation". Dutt reflects on the physical and mental exhaustion of her years in hiding, recognizing that her "mimicry" was a poison that was slowly "dragging" her down. She describes the moment of reclamation as an act of psychological liberation:

The mask had become a cage that was 'asphyxiating' my ability to feel worthy. I realized that my 'inferiority complex' was not a personal failure, but a calculated 'penalty' of the caste system. 'Coming Out' was the only way to stop the 'toil' and finally allow my mind to be at peace with my history. (Dutt, 215)

In this connection, Aparna Nandakumar identifies a condition she calls "Peridomestic Trauma," where the domestic space becomes a site of performance rather than rest. She notes:

Dutt's 'double life' is a manifestation of 'Peridomestic Trauma,' where the subject must perform 'upper-casteness' even within their own mind to avoid the 'penalties' of discovery. Her reclamation is a clinical necessity that halts the 'symbolic suicide' of the self, transforming a 'traumatic strategy' into a pathway for psychiatric survival. (134)

12. The Text Functions as Pedagogical Insurgency

The last phase of the study explores how, Dutt's memoir serves as a textbook for dismantling the "Savarna mask" within academic and professional institutions. In simple terms, this argument suggests that the "toil for survival" (Dutt, xi) is sustained by an educational system that treats caste as a relic of the past rather than a living "structural violence." By "Coming Out," Dutt performs an act of Pedagogical Insurgency, forcing institutions to recognize that their "post-caste" meritocracy is actually a site of "social asphyxiation" for Dalit students and professionals. Dutt reflects on how her education initially served as a tool for "mimicry," dragging her further away from her roots and into a state of "symbolic suicide." The turning point is her realization that true learning requires the destruction of the "Savarna mask":

I had been educated to be a 'perfect' upper-caste woman, a process that required the 'stripping away of my self-determination.' I realized that my survival depended on unlearning the 'stinging shame' I was taught in elite schools. 'Coming Out' was my real graduation—a refusal to be 'asphyxiated' by a version of 'merit' that had no room for my humanity. (Dutt, 232)

In this context critics suggest that the "price for the Savarna mask" is often paid in classrooms where the "stinging shame" (Dutt, 12) of one's identity is reinforced by the absence of Dalit narratives. Brahma Prakash argues that Dutt's narrative is a "Curricular Intervention" against institutional silence. He observes:

Dutt's reclamation is a direct assault on the 'caste-based institutional barriers' of the Indian academy. She exposes that 'merit' is often just a code for 'Savarna performance' and by discarding her mask, she provides a new 'pedagogy of the oppressed' that allows Dalit students to move from 'constant hypervigilance' to intellectual sovereignty. (112)

13. Conclusion

The conclusive remark of this study confirms that the "Savarna mask" is an oppressive survival mechanism necessitated by a system of deep-seated structural violence. This mask is not a choice for social mobility, but a defensive response to a dominant structure that extracts heavy penalties, including discrimination and institutional exclusion, from those who are simply being Dalit. The labor required to maintain this disguise, described as a "toil for survival," results in a profound psychological split and a state of constant hypervigilance. For the Dalit subject, this creates a "dual erasure" where both ancestral history and personal agency are sacrificed to meet the fraudulent requirements of a society that falsely claims to be "post-caste." The study reveals that these barriers persist across global and digital spaces, where 'merit' often serves as a code for upper-caste cultural capital. However, the transition from traumatic concealment to public reclamation marks a radical shift. By "coming out," the individual performs an act of epistemic reclamation, taking back the power to define their own story. This process transforms "stinging shame" into a defiant political standpoint, moving the subject from "symbolic suicide", the slow death of the self through hiding, to a state of radical vulnerability that fosters communal sovereignty.

Ultimately, discarding the mask is the only antidote to social and psychological asphyxiation. This reclamation restores a basic notion of self and asserts a sovereign presence in spaces that previously demanded silence. By refusing to pay the "price for the Savarna mask," the subject ceases the exhausting toil of mimicry and contributes to collective healing. This ensures that future generations can reclaim their social breath and exist in their full, authentic humanity without the burden of a disguise.

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