

Passing and Persistence: Dalit Identity in Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Dalit identity in *Coming Out as Dalit* by Yashica Dutt and *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla. It argues that the two texts present contrasting yet connected experiences of caste in contemporary India. While Dutt's narrative focuses on concealment and the practice of passing in urban spaces, Gidla's work highlights the persistence of caste through family history and collective struggle. The paper shows that Dalit identity is shaped by context, memory, and social location rather than being fixed. In *Coming Out as Dalit*, identity emerges through self-realisation and disclosure, whereas in *Ants Among Elephants*, it is embedded in lived experience and historical continuity. By comparing these narratives, the study demonstrates that caste continues to operate in both visible and subtle forms, making Dalit identity a dynamic and evolving process.

Keywords: Dalit identity, caste concealment, stigma, marginality, resistance

Introduction

Caste continues to shape social relations in contemporary India, even in contexts where it appears less visible. While legal reforms and increased access to education have enabled new forms of mobility, caste has not disappeared; instead, it often operates in more subtle and complex ways. In urban and professional, caste may no longer be immediately legible, yet it continues to influence belonging and social interaction. Recent Dalit life writing reflects this shift by examining how identity is negotiated across different social locations, particularly between visibility and concealment. As Sharmila Rege argues in *Dalit Women's Autobiographies*, Dalit life narratives function as "testimonios" that move beyond individual experience to represent collective histories of oppression, struggle, and resistance (Rege 132). Such narratives are not merely literary expressions but acts of witnessing, through which the narrator claims agency while also calling upon the reader to engage with the social realities being described. The self is shaped in connection with a larger collective experience, where personal memory brings back suppressed histories. Similarly, Deepthi Menon, in *Dalit Feminist Narratives: Mapping the Aesthetics of Minor Literature*, situates such writings within the larger framework of minority discourse, where marginalised voices articulate experiences of domination, subjugation, and resistance (Menon 61).

These narratives emerge from marginal positions and emphasise the tension between identity loss and self-assertion. This perspective helps situate Dalit life writing within a broader field of minority expression while retaining its specific engagement with caste-based inequality. This paper examines Dalit identity in *Coming Out as Dalit* by Yashica Dutt and *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla. These texts offer two distinct yet interconnected perspectives. Dutt's narrative foregrounds the experience of concealment and passing in urban spaces, where caste becomes less visible but remains deeply consequential. In contrast, Gidla's work presents caste as an enduring and visible social reality, shaped by family history, collective memory, and everyday practices of hierarchy. By placing these narratives in dialogue, the paper argues that Dalit identity is not fixed but shaped by context, mobility, and memory. At the same time, drawing on Rege and Menon, both texts can be understood as forms of testimony and minority expression that extend beyond the individual to reflect broader structures of caste and power. The comparison thus highlights how caste continues to operate through both invisibility and persistence, making Dalit identity a dynamic and evolving process.

Concealment and Passing in *Coming Out as Dalit*

Coming Out as Dalit by Yashica Dutt foregrounds the pressures of concealment in urban, professional spaces, where caste is less immediately visible yet continues to shape opportunities and social interactions. Dutt explicitly conceptualises passing as a structured and socially conditioned response to caste-based exclusion. As she notes, "Until I came out as Dalit, I passed as an upper-caste Hindu ... passing refers to an elaborate posturing by mimicking the customs, traditions and manners of a majority community" (Dutt 7). This definition frames passing not as an isolated personal act but as a broader social phenomenon shaped by systemic inequality. The adoption of upper-caste markers such as changes in surname, dietary practices, and religious behaviour, demonstrates how identity is actively performed to secure social acceptance and avoid discrimination. Passing, therefore, emerges as a learned and sustained practice rather than a momentary act. This broader understanding of passing becomes particularly visible in Dutt's personal experience of navigating urban life. Reflecting on her time in Delhi, she notes that she had to "leave India so I didn't have to worry about what would happen if people found out about my caste ... I was too worried, too weak, too tired, to face the fallout" (Dutt 135). This demonstrates that passing is not simply a strategic choice but a response to structural vulnerability.

The fear of losing opportunities and social acceptance compels concealment, making identity something that must be carefully managed rather than openly expressed. In this context, concealment is shaped less by agency than by the unequal consequences attached to disclosure. Significantly, Dutt's account shows that urban anonymity does not eliminate caste but relocates it into the realm of anticipation and anxiety. The constant concern about being "found out" produces a state of psychological strain, where identity remains unstable and contingent. Even in the absence of direct discrimination, the possibility of exposure structures everyday behaviour, reinforcing the persistence of caste in less visible forms. It is only in a context removed from these pressures, as Dutt suggests in her experience in New York, that she is able to acknowledge and accept her caste identity. Passing, in this sense, is both enabling and limiting: while it may provide temporary protection from exclusion, it also demands the suppression of one's history and identity. The need to continuously mimic dominant norms produces a fragile and conditional

belonging, where acceptance is contingent upon successful performance. Rather than dissolving caste, passing thus reaffirms its power by requiring individuals to conform to its hierarchies in order to navigate everyday life.

Persistence and Social Surveillance in *Ants Among Elephants*

Ants Among Elephants by Sujatha Gidla foregrounds the persistence of caste as a social reality that cannot be easily escaped, even outside one's native environment. While caste may appear less immediately visible in unfamiliar spaces, Gidla demonstrates that it is actively reconstructed through social interaction and inquiry. As she observes, "In your own town or village, everyone already knows your caste... They may even seek the opinion of someone from your region" (Gidla 2). This highlights how caste identity is not simply given but continually verified through a network of everyday practices. Questions about food habits, rituals, and family customs function as indirect markers through which caste is identified and confirmed. It also reveals the limited agency available to individuals navigating such scrutiny. The apparent "choice" between disclosure and concealment is shaped by the threat of harassment and exclusion. Even when concealment is attempted, it remains fragile, as others actively seek to uncover one's caste through coded forms of questioning. Caste thus operates not only as a fixed identity but as an ongoing process of social surveillance, sustained through routine interactions rather than formal structures alone.

Mobility, in this context, does not dissolve caste but transforms the ways in which it is detected and enforced. This external surveillance is reinforced by an equally powerful process of internalisation from an early age. Recalling her childhood, Gidla writes, "No one informed me that I was untouchable... I accepted this. No questions asked" (Gidla 3). This moment demonstrates that caste identity is absorbed before it is consciously understood, emerging through repeated observation rather than explicit instruction. The adults' deferential behaviour toward upper-caste individuals serves as a form of lived learning that normalises hierarchy. Gidla's association of Christianity with untouchability further underscores how caste transcends religious boundaries, shaping social relations irrespective of formal belief systems. Through such everyday practices, caste hierarchy is not only observed but reproduced, becoming a taken-for-granted aspect of social life. Unlike contexts where identity may be negotiated or concealed, Gidla's narrative presents caste as an unquestioned and collective reality. Persistence, therefore, is not merely structural but deeply internal, embedded within habit and social conduct from an early age.

Comparative Analysis: Passing vs Persistence

A comparative reading of *Coming Out as Dalit* and *Ants Among Elephants* reveals two distinct yet interconnected modes through which Dalit identity is shaped: passing and persistence. While both texts engage with the continuing presence of caste, they differ significantly in how identity is experienced and articulated across social contexts. In *Coming Out as Dalit*, Yashica Dutt presents caste as something that can, at least temporarily, be concealed through careful performance. Passing involves the deliberate adoption of upper-caste markers such as language, lifestyle, and social behaviour, in order to avoid discrimination and access opportunities. However, this concealment is never complete. As Dutt's narrative shows, passing produces a constant awareness of vulnerability, where identity must be continuously managed to prevent

exposure. The fear of being “found out” shapes everyday interactions, turning identity into a site of anxiety rather than stability. In this context, caste operates as an invisible but persistent force, structuring life even when it is not openly acknowledged. In contrast, *Ants Among Elephants* presents a world in which caste cannot be hidden or negotiated in the same way. Sujatha Gidla depicts caste as a visible and inescapable reality, reinforced through both social surveillance and early internalisation. As her narrative illustrates, caste identity is actively verified through questions about customs, food habits, and family background, making concealment difficult to sustain. At the same time, caste is absorbed from childhood through everyday practices and interactions, becoming a deeply ingrained aspect of social life.

Unlike Dutt’s experience of conditional anonymity, Gidla’s account foregrounds the continuity of caste across generations, where identity is collectively lived rather than individually negotiated. Despite these differences, both texts ultimately demonstrate that caste remains a powerful structuring force. Passing does not eliminate caste; instead, it transforms it into a source of psychological strain and constant self-regulation. Similarly, the persistence of caste in Gidla’s narrative shows that mobility does not necessarily weaken its hold but can reproduce it in new forms. In both cases, caste operates beyond formal structures, shaping behaviour, perception, and social relations in subtle as well as explicit ways. The contrast between passing and persistence thus reveals that Dalit identity is neither fixed nor uniform but shaped by context, location, and social conditions. While Dutt’s narrative highlights the possibilities and limits of concealment in urban spaces, Gidla’s work underscores the enduring and collective nature of caste-based experience. Together, these texts show that caste has not disappeared in contemporary India; rather, it continues to adapt, operating through both visibility and invisibility. Dalit identity, therefore, emerges as a dynamic and evolving process, formed through the interplay of personal negotiation and historical continuity.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the representation of Dalit identity in *Coming Out as Dalit* and *Ants Among Elephants* to argue that caste continues to operate in complex and evolving ways in contemporary India. Through a comparative reading of Yashica Dutt and Sujatha Gidla, the study has shown that Dalit identity is shaped both by the possibility of concealment and by the persistence of social structures that resist such concealment. While Dutt focuses on the pressures of passing in urban contexts where caste appears less visible yet remains influential, Gidla emphasises its enduring and unavoidable presence as a lived, collective reality. Her account demonstrates how caste is sustained not only through external structures but also through everyday practices and early internalisation, making it deeply embedded in social life.

Taken together, these texts reveal that caste has not diminished but has adapted to different contexts, operating through both overt exclusion and subtle forms of social regulation. The contrast between passing and persistence thus complicates any singular understanding of Dalit identity. Rather than being stable or uniform, identity emerges as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by mobility, memory, and social location. By bringing these narratives into dialogue, the paper underscores the need to recognise the varied and continuing forms through which caste structures everyday life, even in spaces that appear to promise anonymity, mobility, or equality.

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