



From Visible Untouchability to the Caste Closet: Caste Legibility, Passing, and Dalit Self-Fashioning in Omprakash Valmiki and Yashica Dutt

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Abstract: This article compares Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* through the concept of caste legibility: the social codes by which caste is read from space, surname, body, language, education, and institutional status. Existing scholarship has examined Valmiki's everyday caste oppression and Dutt's "closet Dalithood," but the relation between visible untouchability and modern caste passing is often narrated as a historical progression. This paper argues instead that the two memoirs expose flexible regimes of recognition. Valmiki records coerced legibility, yet also moments when mobility makes caste temporarily unreadable; Dutt records strategic opacity, yet shows how complexion, family history, English, and reservation can restore caste visibility. Passing therefore does not signal caste's disappearance. It reveals the continuing material risk of being correctly read. Dalit autobiography becomes a form of counter-legibility that reclaims disclosure from caste society and turns stigma into political interpretation.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography; caste legibility; caste passing; stigma; Joothan; Coming Out as Dalit

Introduction

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life* and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* seem at first to belong to two different histories of caste. Valmiki recalls a social order in which settlement, labour, food, water, and schooling make caste brutally public. Dutt writes from a world of elite education and urban mobility in which caste may sometimes be hidden through surname, accent, English, appearance, and cultural competence. A familiar account would read this contrast as progress from visible untouchability to a subtler, weakened caste. The memoirs resist that comforting chronology. Their deeper concern is legibility: how caste becomes readable, who has the authority to read it, and what changes once caste is known. Caste does not require a permanent bodily mark. It can work through locality, name, family history, institutional forms, or the suspicion attached to reservation. Modern mobility may interrupt some signs while creating new ones. The result is not castelessness but a more portable system of classification.

Recent criticism has established important parts of this problem. Gurjar and Srishti identify Dutt's "closet Dalithood" and urban caste performativity; Cherechés stresses caste's resilience despite democracy and education; Duggal shows that urban invisibility does not end exclusion. On Valmiki, Sah and Medhi examine food, education, and religion as everyday sites of caste reproduction. The present study extends these arguments by proposing caste legibility as the common mechanism linking the two memoirs. It argues that visible untouchability and the caste closet are not successive stages but overlapping techniques of caste power.

Critical Framework and Method

The paper uses comparative close reading of scenes involving space, naming, bodily appearance, speech, schooling, and disclosure. Erving Goffman's account of stigma is useful because it refuses to treat the stigmatized identity as an essence located naturally in the person. His emphasis falls instead on the social encounter in which difference becomes meaningful: "The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives (Goffman 164)". For caste analysis, however, Goffman must be used with caution. Caste is not only an unstable interpersonal perception; it is hereditary, collective, endogamous, and institutionally



reproduced. Satyanarayana and Lee's work on caste passing therefore provides a necessary corrective: concealment has to be read within histories of Dalit personhood rather than as a free individual choice. The term caste legibility, as used here, names the interaction between social signs and the material consequences attached to them.

This approach also revises one influential account of Dutt. Gurjar and Srishti describe a movement toward "a more free-floating and performative understanding of caste" (Gurjar and Srishti 67). The formulation is productive because it captures the increased mobility of caste signs in urban life, but the word "free-floating" risks overstating freedom. Dutt's performance is never detached from family history, official classification, marriage, complexion, neighbourhood, or the consequences of disclosure. The point is not that caste becomes freely chosen; rather, caste becomes differently readable.

Joothan: Coerced Legibility and the Caste-Marked Body

In *Joothan*, caste is first learned as geography. The separation of Dalit dwellings from dominant-caste houses means that location classifies the child before he speaks for himself. School reproduces the same logic. When Valmiki is forced to sweep instead of being allowed simply to study, hereditary labour enters the classroom as a lesson in social place. The violence is not only humiliation; it is interpretive control. The institution tells everyone what kind of body the Dalit student is supposed to be. Food, water, labour, and seating work similarly. They are not merely examples of prejudice but techniques through which caste is made publicly intelligible. A separate vessel or a command to clean converts hierarchy into routine knowledge. The Dalit subject is denied ambiguity: caste is made to precede every other identity. The most revealing moment comes when Valmiki reflects on the continuing force of caste despite education and mobility: "Today caste remains a preeminent factor in social life. As long as people don't know that you are a Dalit, things are fine" (Valmiki 154). The distinction between "not knowing" and "finding out" is crucial. Valmiki does not describe caste as a visible biological fact; he describes a social relation activated by recognition. Before disclosure, ordinary interaction is possible. After disclosure, the meaning of the person can change. This is precisely why his autobiography cannot be reduced to a record of rural untouchability. It already contains the central problem that Dutt later names more explicitly: what happens when caste is temporarily unreadable?

Surname, Mobility, and the Politics of Recognition

The surname is the strongest bridge between the two memoirs because it makes caste portable. In a village, caste may be read through residence, kinship, and occupation; in mobile institutions, the surname can carry that knowledge across space. Valmiki's name is therefore both self-assertion and risk. To retain a caste-marked surname refuses shame, but the same sign can be used by others to discriminate. This contradiction reveals an unequal burden of transparency. Dominant-caste subjects can often treat caste as irrelevant because their caste location is normalised. Dalit subjects may have to choose between disclosure and concealment. The apparent freedom to exist as an unmarked individual is itself a privilege unevenly distributed by caste.

Coming Out as Dalit: Passing as Social Labour

Dutt begins from this burden of managed recognition. She frames concealment not as a neutral silence but as the exhausting production of multiple selves: "Hiding one aspect of your identity is like leading a double life. You don't feel like you belong anywhere. You create masks to wear" (Dutt xi). The language of the "double life" is important because passing is represented as labour rather than freedom. A changed surname, elite schooling, English, dress, food habits, religious familiarity, and confidence together produce an upper-caste readability. What looks like individual mobility therefore depends upon learning the cultural codes through which privilege recognises itself. Concealment works only because the surrounding society continues to attach unequal value to what may eventually be discovered. The body is drawn into the same process. Dutt's discussion of complexion



shows that caste legibility is never confined to official categories. Colourism, gender, and caste intersect to create an imagined visual grammar of who appears respectable, upper caste, or socially acceptable. The absence of a real biological caste phenotype does not stop society from inventing one. Such stereotypes become material because they affect confidence, social reception, marriageability, and the possibility of moving without suspicion. This is why describing Dutt's caste identity as simply "performative" can be misleading if performance is confused with freedom. Her family manipulates signs because discovery can change social relations. Passing is constrained by kinship, locality, institutional records, reservation status, and people who know the family's history. The caste closet is thus evidence of continuing caste power: concealment becomes rational only when disclosure remains costly.

Education, Merit, and New Forms of Caste Visibility

Education is emancipatory in both memoirs, but neither text allows it to stand outside caste. Valmiki's school tries to return an aspiring student to hereditary labour. Dutt's elite education enables mobility but cannot protect achievement from being reinterpreted once caste or reservation becomes known. The mechanism changes from direct exclusion to suspicion of legitimacy. Reservation is especially significant because a constitutional remedy for historical exclusion can be turned into a modern caste marker. Dominant-caste discourse often treats inherited advantage as invisible while making affirmative action hyper-visible. Dalit achievement can then be explained away as quota rather than merit. The educated Dalit subject becomes harder to confine, so caste power shifts towards a question of deservingness: How did you enter? What is your category? Are you really meritorious? Modern institutions therefore do not simply erase caste; they create new occasions for reading it.

Meritocracy and the Epistemology of Suspicion

The comparison also exposes a less visible mechanism of modern caste: the conversion of Dalit achievement into an object of suspicion. In a formally egalitarian institution, caste power cannot always operate through direct commands such as the headmaster's demand that Valmiki sweep. It can instead operate by questioning how a Dalit student or professional arrived at a position of competence. The language of "merit" appears neutral, but in caste society it often functions as a selective test of legitimacy. Upper-caste educational capital, inherited confidence, family networks, English-language training, and familiarity with elite institutions disappear from view, while reservation becomes hyper-visible. The result is an asymmetry of explanation: dominant-caste success is treated as individual ability, whereas Dalit success can be made to require an institutional explanation. This asymmetry is central to caste legibility because it shows that recognition does not end when crude markers weaken. Instead, the question shifts from "What is your caste?" to "How did you get here?" The modern institution therefore creates a new reading practice. Category, certificate, surname, college admission, accent, and professional location can all become clues through which caste is reconstructed. Dutt's account of concealment becomes especially significant in this context. Passing protects not only against explicit insult but also against the interpretive downgrade by which an achievement may be reclassified as undeserved once caste is known. Her memoir thus reveals that meritocracy can become an epistemology of suspicion: it teaches privileged subjects to read Dalit presence as something requiring explanation.

Valmiki's experience provides the historical underside of this mechanism. The child forced to sweep is told that education is socially improper for him; the educated Dalit adult may be told, more politely, that his place was obtained through concession. The forms differ, but the underlying demand is comparable: Dalit aspiration must be justified before an audience that rarely asks privileged subjects to account for their inherited advantages. Read together, the memoirs show that caste adapts when direct exclusion becomes publicly indefensible. It moves from denying entry to contesting the legitimacy of entry. This is one reason a simple narrative of progress from untouchability to equality cannot adequately describe the social worlds of the two texts.



Autobiography as Counter-Legibility

Dalit autobiography reverses the direction of scrutiny. Caste society asks the Dalit subject to account for surname, origin, occupation, and legitimacy; life writing makes the social order itself answerable. Thapan's description of Dalit autobiography as counter-public writing is useful because she emphasises that these narratives do more than reproduce injury: autobiographies simultaneously constitute "subaltern counter publics" (Thapan 25). The force of the term "counter publics" lies in its movement from private injury to public argument. In Joothan, experiences once treated as individual shame become evidence against caste society. In *Coming Out as Dalit*, disclosure converts a hidden identity into a standpoint from which privilege can be named. The memoirs therefore do not seek invisibility as their final political goal. They seek to control the conditions under which caste becomes visible and to strip dominant society of its monopoly over interpretation.

Valmiki's retention of a caste-marked surname and Dutt's eventual "coming out" are different strategies, but both transform involuntary legibility into chosen narration. The autobiographical "I" speaks from caste history without agreeing that caste exhausts the self. Dalit life writing, in this sense, is not merely testimonial; it is a struggle over recognition itself.

Gendered Caste Legibility

Dutt's memoir also makes visible something that a purely class-based account of passing misses: caste legibility is gendered. Women are read through norms of complexion, respectability, marriageability, family background, dress, sexuality, and domestic behaviour in ways that intensify the burden of caste management. The pressure to appear "acceptable" is therefore not simply a pressure to resemble an abstract upper-caste individual; it is frequently a pressure to embody an upper-caste feminine respectability. Colourism is important here because it turns the body into a social text even though caste has no stable biological appearance. The imagined "Dalit look" works precisely because stereotype can have social effects without possessing empirical truth.

This gendered dimension sharpens the paper's distinction between performance and agency. Performance may suggest flexibility, but not every act of self-fashioning is freely chosen. A woman who modifies speech, appearance, surname, or autobiographical disclosure because the social penalties of recognition are unequal is exercising agency under constraint. The critical task is therefore to identify both elements at once: the ingenuity involved in managing caste signs and the violence of a society that makes such management necessary. Treating passing only as successful self-fashioning risks aestheticising a survival strategy and overlooking the fear, vigilance, and anticipatory shame that sustain it. The contrast with Valmiki is again instructive. His memoir repeatedly shows public caste discipline directed at the body through labour, touch, food, and spatial segregation. Dutt shows a later configuration in which the body remains politically readable through complexion and gendered respectability even when occupational and residential markers have become less immediate. Modernity, then, does not disembodify caste. It reorganises embodiment. The body is no longer necessarily marked through a fixed public occupation, but it can still be scrutinised for signs that confirm or destabilise assumptions about social origin.

The Limits of the Caste-Closet Metaphor

Dutt's use of "coming out" effectively names secrecy, double life, risk, and disclosure, but the analogy with the queer closet cannot be complete. Caste is reproduced through descent, kinship, endogamy, locality, occupation, and institutional classification. It can be a family secret, and the capacity to hide it depends heavily on class, education, region, surname, complexion, and mobility. The caste closet is therefore stratified: some subjects can become temporarily unreadable, while others are identified before they can choose opacity.

The metaphor nevertheless remains critically productive if it is used to describe a regime of risk rather than an identical structure of identity. The central question is not whether caste and sexuality are the same; they are not.



The question is why a person may need to manage disclosure because social treatment changes once a stigmatized identity is known. The value of the comparison lies in the politics of knowledge, secrecy, and recognition. This limitation strengthens the comparison with Valmiki. Earlier Dalit life already includes migration, misrecognition, temporary anonymity, and altered contexts of recognition; contemporary caste still includes overt violence and enforced visibility. The change is not from fixed caste to free performance. It is from one configuration of caste signs to another.

From Visibility to Recognition: The Failure of a Post-Caste Modernity

The most important theoretical consequence of reading the memoirs together is that visibility and invisibility are not opposites. They are positions within the same economy of recognition. Valmiki is injured by being made too legible: caste is imposed before other aspects of the self can acquire social meaning. Dutt is injured by the need to remain selectively illegible: ordinary acceptance can depend upon preventing others from attaching the “correct” caste label. Both situations grant extraordinary interpretive power to the observer. Caste operates through the assumption that discovering social origin authorises a revision of the person’s value. For this reason, urbanisation and mobility cannot by themselves produce a post-caste society. They may weaken local knowledge, but they also multiply documentary, linguistic, institutional, and cultural signs through which caste can be reconstructed. The city can provide anonymity, yet anonymity is conditional and uneven. The school, university, workplace, marriage market, housing network, and digital profile each become possible sites of renewed legibility. What changes is less the existence of caste than the technologies of knowing it.

This argument also clarifies why autobiography matters formally. The memoir does not merely disclose caste identity; it exposes the social hunger for caste information. By narrating the circumstances in which caste becomes known, Valmiki and Dutt redirect attention from the supposedly essential identity of the Dalit subject to the interpretive practices of caste society. The critical object shifts from “Who is Dalit?” to “How, when, and with what consequences does society decide that someone is Dalit?” Caste legibility is useful precisely because it keeps that relation of reading, power, and consequence at the centre of analysis.

Conclusion

Reading *Joothan* and *Coming Out as Dalit* through caste legibility unsettles the claim that modernity gradually makes caste irrelevant. Valmiki shows caste imposed through place, labour, schooling, and name; Dutt shows caste managed through name, English, appearance, cultural competence, and disclosure. Yet both texts demonstrate that the crucial issue is what happens when caste is read. Passing does not disprove caste because the need to pass is created by caste. Assertion does not automatically neutralise caste because the same sign can be used for pride and discrimination. The memoirs intervene by taking control of legibility: they expose how society reads caste while refusing the meanings attached to that reading.

Their political demand is therefore more difficult than a simple desire for castelessness. The texts demand a social world in which caste history can be acknowledged without inherited hierarchy determining the value of the person who bears it. In this sense, Dalit autobiography becomes both testimony and theory: it records caste experience while also explaining how recognition itself can become a mechanism of power.

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