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## SELF-DECEPTION AND DALIT EMANCIPATION (COMING OUT): A DIALECTICAL STUDY OF SELECT DALIT PERSONAL NARRATIVES

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### Abstract

This paper presents a dialectical study of select Dalit personal narratives in the context of self-deception and Dalit emancipation. The study explores the ways in which Dalit individuals engage in self-deception as a survival mechanism in the face of caste-based discrimination and oppression. Drawing on critical social theory and feminist approach, the paper argues that self-deception is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon that is shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors. Through an analysis of select Dalit personal narratives, who have successfully come out and challenged dominant power structures, the study identifies key moments of self-deception and resistance that inform the dialectical process of Dalit emancipation and demonstrates how self-deception can both facilitate and hinder Dalit emancipation. Ultimately, the paper argues that a dialectical approach to self-deception and Dalit emancipation is necessary in order to fully understand the complex interplay between individual agency, social structures, and historical processes in the struggle for Dalit liberation.

**Key Words:** Self- deception, Dalit, oppression, coming out, identity, society

### Introduction (Introducing the Idea of Self-Deception in the Context of Dalit Identity)

Humans are perennially compelled to master the art of self-deception as a coping strategy to survive a socially oppressive regime that is based on class and caste discrimination. We are made to coax ourselves into believing things that are overtly untrue; in other words, we train ourselves to wilfully refute our own excruciating existential realities. We engage in such imaginative recreations of counterfactual scenarios where we are seemingly happy and contented; this self-deception creates for us a façade of a dignified social status which is, in reality, denied to us. This strange act of self-deception acts a camouflage to reality and this is true of the Dalit's precarious social situation today where he is awkwardly submerged in this situational

ambiguity created by class and caste differences. This fallacious engagement, though not natural to us, has given us a momentary delusion of happiness; this act of self-deception has diluted the pangs of our immensely problematic social reality and has progressively turned into a falsely comfort-providing and realistically untenable cultural phenomenon.

Current research regarding our self-deception confirms that we often indulge in self-denial about our marginalized identities without being fully aware of the ethical obligations that we owe to ourselves and to others belonging to our downgraded and ostracized community. As Babasaheb rightly argues that unlike a drop of water that loses its distinctiveness upon entering the ocean, an individual does not lose their unique identity upon entering society. Even though society

plays a crucial role in the formation of an individual's social life, a person's individual existence continues to remain an autonomous entity despite its complex entanglement in the social sphere.

The existence of one's of the Dalit identity in the society is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, as it is shaped by their experiences of oppression, resistance, and empowerment. Dalit identity is not an unconditioned given; it is a socio-cultural construct. The Dalits often identify themselves through their caste, as it is an important marker of their social position and cultural heritage. However, their caste identity is also a source of stigma and discrimination, which can lead to feelings of shame and inferiority. The experience of an identity crisis can be particularly challenging for Dalits as they confront systemic discrimination and marginalisation based on their inferior caste identity. Thus while confronting an identity crisis, Dalits may engage in self-deception about their identity as a coping mechanism to deal with the challenges of their doleful social reality.

Self-deception is a complex psychological phenomenon that occurs when individuals consciously or unconsciously alienate themselves from their own thoughts, emotions, or behaviours. In the context of the Dalit community, self-deception can be particularly damaging, as it may lead individuals to accept and internalise discriminatory beliefs and attitudes that perpetuate their community's generic oppression and marginalisation. One way that Dalits may experience self-deception is by purposely denying or downplaying their caste identity. This can manifest as an attempt, on their part, to assimilate into the dominant culture or society, to hide their caste identity in social situations, or to distance themselves from the sphere of their Dalit community. This can be a way to avoid the stigma and discrimination that come with being a Dalit, but it can also lead to an unfortunate loss of the Dalit individual's connection to his community and cultural heritage that have formed his social identity and have shaped his innate cultural consciousness. Another way that Dalits may experience self-deception is through a falsified over-identification with dominant cultural or social identities, such as

religious or regional identities. This can provide him a temporary and falsified sense of acceptance or privilege within the socio-cultural terrain of the dominant communities; but on the flipside, it widens his disconnection from his own cultural roots and divulges his clandestine betrayal of his own community.

#### **Identity and Inferiority: A Conditioned Condition**

Identity is a central theme in Dalit literature, which often explores the ways in which Dalits have been denied, suppressed, or distorted in their sense of self. In Dalit literature, "deception of identity" refers to how Dalits have been forced to follow cultural norms and values that deny or downplay their own cultural identity and heritage. Dalit literature shows deception of identity by showing how many Dalits feel like they are being oppressed from the inside out. This can take the form of self-hatred, shame, and a sense of inferiority that is imposed on them by the dominant culture. In the book *Annihilation of Caste* by B.R. Ambedkar, for example, the author talks about how the caste system has given Dalits a false sense of identity based on the idea that they are inferior and can't be touched. The caste system in India has historically placed Dalits, also known as "untouchables," at the bottom of the social hierarchy, with little access to education, economic opportunities, and political power. This marginalisation has led to a culture of fear and social control that has played a significant role in the formation of self-deception among Dalits. Fear is a very effective way to keep people in line and stop them from making changes. Dalits have been conditioned to fear the consequences of challenging the caste system and the power structures that support it. This fear is kept alive by different kinds of violence, such as physical, verbal, and mental abuse. Because of this, many Dalits have learned to accept their lower status as something that is part of who they are and can't be changed.

Self-deception is a psychological defence that helps people keep their self-esteem and sense of control when things aren't going well. Dalits may deceive themselves by thinking that their lower status is deserved or that they are worse than people from other castes. This can make people feel

hopeless and give up, which can make the status quo stronger and keep the cycle of oppression going.

Social control is also an important factor in the formation of self-deception among Dalits. The caste system is supported by a complex network of social norms and values that reinforce the belief in the inherent superiority of upper castes and the inferiority of Dalits. These norms and values are perpetuated through various channels, including religion, media, and education. Dalits are often taught to accept these norms and values as natural and unchangeable aspects of their identity, which can contribute to a sense of self-deception and resignation.

Identity and inferiority are indeed conditioned conditions for Dalits, as their identity as Dalits is often associated with being inferior and unworthy. This sense of inferiority is not inherent to the community but has been imposed on them through centuries of social conditioning and discrimination. This conditioning is perpetuated through the caste system, which assigns lower social status to Dalits and denies them access to resources, education, and opportunities. The social and economic exclusion that results from this system reinforces the belief that Dalits are inferior, and they are often subjected to discrimination, violence, and exploitation.

Fear and social control play a big role in how Dalits start to lie to themselves. The caste system keeps up a culture of fear and violence, and social norms and values that reinforce the belief in the inherent superiority of upper castes can make Dalits feel hopeless and like they aren't good enough. To stop deceiving yourself, you have to challenge the power structures that keep the caste system going and create new stories that show that everyone, no matter their caste or social status, has dignity and worth. However, it is essential to note that Dalits have been actively resisting this conditioning and challenging the oppressive caste system. Many Dalit leaders and organizations have been working towards empowering the community and creating awareness about their rights and dignity. By breaking the cycle of conditioning and asserting their identity with pride, Dalits can challenge the

notion of inferiority and work towards a more just and equal society.

### **Interrogating the Idea of Self-Deception in Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir***

Yashica Dutt, in her book *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*, talks about the past, present, and future of Dalits. She sheds light on Dalits' bloody past, their not-so-joyful present, and the possibility of a prosperous future. The tragic death of Rohit Vemula in 2016 made the author ruminate on his own identity. She was afraid to tell people that she was a member of the Dalit community. It was part of the insecurity that many people from the Dalit community have. She was suffering from an inferiority complex. The memoir is about more than just a Dalit woman's inferiority complex and insecurities as she hides her Dalit identity behind an upper caste mask. She feels indomitable energy and happiness when she finally comes out as a Dalit. So, the concept of "coming out, which serves as the central essence of this work, is nothing but a form of self-recognition and acceptance of the real self. It refers to the process of breaking the mask and the illusory camouflage. In this context Dutt remarks: Pretending to be from a caste that's not Dalit is something like that. And there are so many of us who are living this lie. We avoid talking about caste, hoping to somehow find a place in the world of upper-caste that has been forbidden to us. We create upper-caste identities—stolen badges—that help us gain entry to a space that will reject us the moment it finds out who we really are. (Dutt, 11)

In Hindu society, where caste is the kernel of identity, it is impossible to hide one's caste. People with a lower caste avoid talking about it or take on the guise of an upper caste identity. The above-mentioned quotation is a theoretical encapsulation of Yashica Dutt's life. She, because of her marginally better family background, has spent most of her life among upper-caste people. To assimilate in that setting, she adopted an upper-caste identity. The fear of ostracization from the community and the embarrassment of facing frequent casteist slurs compelled her to suppress her true identity. This went on for years until she resurrected her true identity with firm consciousness. So far, I had

escaped the humiliation of being 'discovered' as Bhangi, and now I was forever taking away their power to do so: by doing it myself. I was putting an end to my constant struggle of hiding behind my education or my career, escaping through my proficient English or my (not so dark) skin colour. In a way, I was turning my Dalitness into a gold medal of ancestral pride and suffering. I was going to proclaim openly and proudly that I was DALIT. I uploaded Rohith's photograph next to my note and hit publish. Everyone who read it would know I was Dalit. There was no going back. (Ibid)

Throughout the book, Dutt shares her experience of growing up as a Dalit and her journey towards accepting and embracing her Dalit identity. As a part of this journey, she also reflects on the concept of self-deception and how it manifests in the lives of Dalits. According to Dutt, self-deception is a coping mechanism that many Dalits use to navigate the systemic discrimination and oppression they face. She notes that growing up, she was often told that she was not really Dalit, that her family was an exception to the rule, and that her experiences of discrimination were just figments of her imagination. These messages, she says, led her to question her own identity and to try to distance herself from her Dalit roots. Dutt says that this kind of self-deception is harmful because it keeps spreading the idea that caste discrimination is not a real problem and that Dalits are somehow to blame for their own oppression. She believes that meaningful change can only occur by acknowledging the reality of caste discrimination and the ways in which it affects individuals and communities. Dutt's understanding of self-deception is deeply rooted in her own experiences as a Dalit woman. She recognises the ways in which she herself has engaged in self-deception in order to protect herself from the harsh realities of caste discrimination, and she encourages other Dalits to be honest with themselves about their experiences as well. The author's journey towards emancipation required her to confront this self-deception and acknowledge her Dalit identity. It was only by doing so that she could begin to understand the experiences of other Dalits and work towards breaking down the caste system. In this sense, the role of self-deception in the

road to emancipation is portrayed as a negative one. It is a barrier that must be overcome in order to recognize and confront the reality of oppression and discrimination faced by marginalized groups. By doing so, she believes that Dalits can begin to challenge the structures of caste oppression and work towards a more just and equitable society.

#### **Investigating Self-Deception in Bama's *Karrukku***

*Karrukku* is an autobiographical essay by Tamil Dalit feminist writer Bama that explores her experiences growing up as a Dalit woman in Tamil Nadu, India. The theme of self-deception runs throughout the essay, as Bama reflects on how she was taught to internalise and accept the dominant Brahminical values that saw Dalits as inferior and unworthy.

Bama describes how she initially believed the narrative that Dalits were inferior, and even felt ashamed of her own community and identity. She talks about how she tried to hide the fact that she was Dalit by changing her accent, wearing different clothes, and not eating certain things. This self-deception was a way for her to try and fit into the dominant caste society and avoid the discrimination and violence that often came with being a Dalit.

We encounter *self-deception* in *Karrukku* through various incidents in the life of Bama and the folks surrounding her. The following factors are naked examples of the evidence of self-deception in *Karrukku*.

**Changing her accent:** Bama writes that as a child, she would try to mimic the upper-caste accent and avoid using Dalit slang or expressions. She believed that speaking with a more "educated" accent would help her fit in better with the dominant caste society. **Hiding her caste identity:** Bama writes that she would often try to hide her Dalit identity by avoiding certain foods, changing her dress, and avoiding interactions with upper-caste people that could reveal her background. Bama writes that as a child, she believed the dominant story, which said that Dalits were inferior and unworthy. She thought that the people in her community were to blame for their own troubles and were being punished for supposed sins they had done in past lives.

**Rejecting her own experiences:** Bama writes that as a young adult, she initially rejected the idea that she was being discriminated against because of her caste identity. She believed that her struggles were due to personal flaws rather than systemic oppression.

**Shame about her community:** Bama describes feeling ashamed of her community and identity as a Dalit. She writes that she used to think of her community as "dirty" and "inferior," and that she felt embarrassed to tell people that she was a Dalit.

**Avoiding certain foods:** Bama also writes about how she would avoid eating certain foods that were associated with Dalit culture, such as cow's blood or meat from animals that had died of natural causes. She notes that she did this in order to avoid being identified as a Dalit.

**Accepting Brahminical values:** Bama reflects on how she was taught to internalise and accept the dominant Brahminical values that saw Dalits as inferior and unworthy. She notes that she used to believe the narrative that Dalits were meant to be "servants" and that they should be grateful for the scraps that the dominant caste society gave them.

**Silence about discrimination:** Bama also writes about how, for many years, she remained silent about the discrimination and violence that her community faced. She says this was a form of self-deception because she didn't want to face the truth and instead tried to fit in with the dominant caste society.

These examples show how Bama told herself false things about who she was as a Dalit woman. She thought that if she followed the Brahminical values that were most popular, she could avoid the prejudice and violence that her community faced. But as Bama got older and learned more about the unfairness and violence that Dalits had to deal with, she started to question the dominant story and see through the self-deception she had bought into. She began to embrace her Dalit identity and speak out against the discrimination and violence that her community faced. In doing so, she was able to break free from the self-deception that had held her back

and work towards creating a more just and equitable society for all.

It is important to note that individuals from marginalised communities, such as Dalits, may not necessarily choose to deceive their identity. In fact, the discrimination and shame that Dalits face in Indian society can put pressure on people to hide or downplay their Dalit identity. Some Dalits may choose to lie about who they are in order to protect themselves from prejudice and violence. In many parts of India, Dalits face significant barriers to education, employment, and social mobility and may be subject to physical and verbal abuse from members of higher castes. In order to avoid such discrimination and violence, some Dalits may choose to conceal their identity by changing their names, avoiding Dalit neighbourhoods or communities, or even passing as members of higher castes. Another reason why some Dalits may deceive their identity is to gain access to opportunities and resources that are otherwise unavailable to them. In some cases, individuals from Dalit communities may be discriminated against in the workplace or in other social settings, and may be more likely to be hired or accepted if they conceal their Dalit identity. This may involve changing their name or accent, or hiding their family background or caste affiliation. It is important to recognise that the pressure to conceal one's Dalit identity is a result of the systemic discrimination and oppression faced by Dalits in Indian society, rather than a personal choice.

### **The Anatomy of Emancipation/ The Road to Emancipation**

The study of the "anatomy of emancipation" in the context of Dalit liberation refers to the various aspects and dimensions of the process of achieving social, political, and economic freedom and equality for the Dalit community. It is a multifaceted approach that takes into account the historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors that have contributed to the oppression of Dalits and the strategies that can be employed to bring about their emancipation. So understanding and making the road to emancipation of Dalits requires an acknowledgment and dismantling of the caste system, a celebration and promotion of Dalit culture

and history, and the creation of policies and programs that address the specific needs of Dalits. It also requires addressing systemic and institutionalized discrimination and creating a more inclusive and representative political system.

### Coming Out

To come out as Dalit, one must first recognize and confront their internalized casteism and self-deception. This can be a challenging and complex process, as it often involves unlearning deeply ingrained beliefs and behaviors. Seeking support from the Dalit community and allies can be helpful in this process.

**Recognising the self-deception:** The first step is to recognise and acknowledge the self-deception that exists within oneself. This can be done through self-reflection and introspection, as well as through engaging in conversations with others who have experienced similar issues.

**Seeking support:** Seeking support from trusted individuals, such as family members, friends, or community leaders, can be an essential part of the process. Support can help individuals feel less isolated and can provide encouragement and motivation to keep moving forward.

**Self-Awareness:** Building self-awareness can help individuals understand their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their values and beliefs. This can be achieved through various means, such as counselling, mentorship, or self-help resources.

**Cultural and Social Awareness:** Cultural and social awareness can help break down stereotypes and promote greater understanding and tolerance between different castes. This can be done with the help of cultural and social events that bring people from different backgrounds together to talk and learn from each other.

**Education:** Education is a powerful tool that can help Dalits understand their rights and empower them to challenge the status quo. Dalits can stop telling themselves they are inferior and can't be successful if they have access to good education and are encouraged to think critically.

**Community Mobilisation:** It is important to get the community involved in order to challenge the existing power structures and come up with new stories that promote the dignity and worth of each person. This can be done with the help of community-based groups that give Dalits a place to talk about their problems and work for social change.

**Challenging the status quo:** Challenging the status quo and the power structures that keep the caste system going is important if you want to stop fooling yourself. This can mean speaking out against discrimination, pushing for policy changes, or getting involved in social activism.

**Embracing a new narrative:** Embracing a new narrative that affirms the dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of their caste or social status, is an essential part of the process. This can involve creating new cultural or social practises that promote inclusion and tolerance as well as rejecting stereotypes and discriminatory beliefs.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of self-deception and Dalit emancipation through personal narratives sheds light on the complexity of the issue. The dialectical approach helps to understand how the process of coming out, as described by the select Dalit personal narratives, is intertwined with self-deception. The narratives reveal how the process of self-discovery is not a linear one, and it involves facing uncomfortable truths and breaking free from the societal norms that restrict individuals. The study highlights the importance of acknowledging the role of self-deception in the process of Dalit emancipation and calls for a need to create a safe space for individuals to share their stories without fear of judgment. It requires a commitment to personal growth and social change, as well as a willingness to engage in collective action to create a more just and equitable society. This also needs a concerted effort to challenge the power structures that perpetuate the caste system and create new narratives that affirm the dignity and worth of all individuals. The anatomy of emancipation, therefore, involves a comprehensive approach that addresses the various dimensions of the problem of

caste-based discrimination and oppression. It also recognizes that the process of emancipation is a long-term and ongoing one that requires sustained effort and commitment.

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