



PASSING : A STUDY OF THE MEMOIRS YASHICA DUTT'S COMING OUT AS DALIT AND GAIL LUKASIK'S WHITE LIKE HER: MY FAMILY'S STORY OF RACE AND RACIAL PASSING



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ABSTRACT

Passing is the ability of a person to be regarded as a member of an identity group or category, often different from their own, which may include racial identity, ethnicity, caste, social class, sexual orientation, gender, religion, age and/or disability status. Passing may result in privileges, rewards, or an increase in social acceptance, or be used to cope with stigma. Thus, passing may serve as a form of self-preservation or self-protection in instances where expressing one's true or prior identity may be dangerous.

Yashica Dutt and Gail Lukasik's memoirs deal with the theme of 'Passing'. In India the educated and rich mostly pass as upper caste Brahmins and in America the light-skinned African Americans pass as White. Passing doesn't just means hiding one's real identity it also means losing one's true self, family, friends etc. It is a kind of chosen exile.

KEYWORDS

Passing, identity, ethnicity, caste, gender, race

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One of the similarities we find in India and America is ‘Passing’ of people as something they are not. In India those who are highly educated and rich pass as upper caste ‘Brahmin’, similarly in America the light-skinned people ‘pass’ as white.

Out as Dalit is a memoir by Yashica Dutt. It was published in 2019, it won the Sahitya Akadami Yuva Puraskar for book in the English category for the year 2020. It deals with the theme of ‘passing’ as upper caste Brahmin. Dutt was born in Ajmer, Rajasthan. Her father was a civil servant with the state government. Her mother, whose dream of joining the IPS was wrecked by a difficult marriage to an alcoholic, she worked a series of hard, low-paying gigs to put her children through school. Dutt was told by her parents that whenever someone ask her about her caste then give reply that she is Brahmin or that she don’t know. Since her childhood Dutt have to bear the burden to hide her caste. Her mother was so determined to protect her three children from the discrimination of the Hindu caste system that relegates Dalits to the periphery of society that she pretended her family was Brahmin. They did everything to pretend that they are Brahmins. They stopped eating non-veg, threw big parties even though they couldn’t afford it and also dress-up like them. As English language is also associated with upper caste, Dutt’s mother was determined that at any cost her children must learn to speak fluent English and as white color is also associated with upper caste identity, her mother used ubtan for skin whitening.

Dutt talks about the pressure she felt as a child, she says,

“I was always second -guessing myself, wondering if I had said the right thing, asking myself ‘would upper caste people with happier childhood have said it better or done it differently? I had so much doubt from feeling like an imposter.”

Dutt also said that she felt guilty of many things. Firsts it was guilt at her mother educating her when she could not afford it. Then it was guilt at having survived and enjoyed opportunities for education that so many in her community had never had and never would.

In the US Dutt discovered a parallel with her own experience. She heard some light-skinned African Americans talks of how they used to “Pass” as white, assuming certain habits, tastes, languages and mannerisms, just as her mother had mimicked those of upper caste Hindus. Caste haunted Dutt, who choose to work as a fashion journalist in India, eschewing politics for fear that in writing a story or expressing an opinion she might reveal her caste. The fear of being “Outed” was a permanent cloud. “If people know, would they even sit next to me?”

It was not until 2016, in New York, that Dutt felt able to “come out”. That year, suicide of a Dalit student, Rohit Vemula at Hyderabad University was a huge story in India. His last letter began: “My birth is my fatal accident.”

She says, “Unlike me, Rohit did nothing to bury his Dalitness. Instead, he used it to stand up for Dalit students at Hyderabad University”. His pride and courage despite enjoying none of her advantages prompted Dutt to write a Facebook post announcing her real caste. Vemul’s death, she wrote, “made me realize that my history is one of oppression, not shame”. She feels that now she is a “whole person”, at home in her own skin. Dutt calls caste the “invisible arm that turns the gears in nearly every system in our country.”

The similar theme of “passing” is used in Gail Lukasik’s memoir *White Like Her: My Family’s story of Race and Racial Passing*. It was published in 2017. It is about Gail’s mother who ‘pass’ as white. She hid it even from her husband and children. When Gail discovered her mother’s secret her mother said,

“Promise me”, she pleaded, “you won’t tell anyone until after I die. How will I hold my head up with my friends?”

Gail discovered truth in 1995 while scrolling through the 1900 Louisiana census record. In record her mother’s father, Azemar Frederic of New Orleans and his entire family were designated black. After 2 years of discovery Gail told her mother about it. Her reaction was as above. After her mother’s fearful plea for secrecy Gail got confused about her racial identity so she further enquired about it and discovered that her mother’s 1921 birth certificate from the state of Louisiana, listed her race as “Col” (color) and a 1940 Louisiana census record, listed her mother, Alvera Frederick, as Neg/Negro, working in a tea shop in New Orleans. Four years later, her mother moved north and married a white man. Gail kept her mother’s secret for 17 years she told no one, except her husband, her 2 children, and two close friends. Her mother always told her that she was reluctant to visit her family of origin in New Orleans because she hadn’t been raised by either parent and there were just too many sad memories. Now Gail wondered if she was really afraid that if they visited, they’d meet family members who were not possibly white. On several occasions her mother and sister visited them in Ohio. But they appeared white and no one hinted otherwise. Did her brother never visited them because he didn’t appear white?

Her mother used to avoid going out in sun she used hand glows. She was obsessed with make-up that she wore make-up while going to bed. Gail’s father was a racist man. He didn’t like black people, he criticized them for lack of ambition and criminality. Gail’s mother didn’t tell her husband about her real race. Her mother by marrying a white man paid a price by losing family ties and her authentic self, every day she had to live with the paradox of what W.E.B Du Bois called “two-ness”, the ambivalence of people of mixed European and African ancestry. As if in self-defense or maybe retaliation for her husband’s racism, she imbued Gail with a moral imperative to respect all people regardless of their color.

Allyson Hobbs in her book *‘A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in America’* said “to write a history of passing is to writing a history of loss”. Loss of self. Loss of family. Loss of community. Loss of the ability to answer honestly the question black people have been asking each other since before emancipation: “who are your people?” The family jokes, the oral history every family has and repeats and passes down, Hobbs muses, “those things are lost to people who pass”.

Hobbs began writing about passing for her doctoral dissertation, and was encouraged to turn it into a book. It is a history of passing told through the lens of personal stories. Hobbs said one of the things she learned as she delved deeper into her research was that passing was not a solitary act. It required other people who were willing to keep your secret, and a community that was willing to let you go and look the other way, even when it hurt.

Countless African Americans and Dalits have passed as white and upper caste respectively, leaving behind families and friends, roots and communities. It was, as Allyson Hobbs writes, a chosen exile. This history of passing explores the possibilities, challenges, and losses that race and caste indeterminacy presented to men and women living in a country obsessed with racial and caste distinctions.

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