

**Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*: Portrayal of a Dalit's Life
Traumatic Experiences**

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Abstract:

The caste system in India has isolated innumerable dalits, from mainstream of life .Being socially segregated for centuries; they are obliged to live a helpless life without menial facilities. Dalit Literature is the only medium to show their cruelties. They have been suffering in the name of the caste system. Their life is marked with disgrace, humiliation, dishonor, suppression and discrimination. *Joothan* is an autobiography by Omprakash Valmiki in which he has explored the issues of exploitation of Dalits. Dalit autobiographies are meant to be understood as a representative story, where the 'ordinary' or 'representative' Dalit individual uses his narrative to raise his voice for those who are silenced by caste oppression. The present research article intends to depict that how a Dalit writer has used the tool of autobiography to show the harsh realities of caste system. It also demonstrates the sufferings and humiliations of an untouchable in the India that how he was deprived of even basic human rights.

Key Words: Dalit, Caste System, Sufferings, India, Autobiography, Humiliation, Depiction.

Introduction: Literature became a very effective tool for the Dalits to express their trauma as well as anger against the embarrassment and ill-treatment meted out to them. Prominent writers in Dalit writings are Mulk Raj Anand, Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Basudev Sunani, Bama, Sharankumar Limbale, Lakshman Gaekwad, Sivakami, poonami, Om Prakash Valmiki etc. The aim of Dalit writings is to bring about a change and revolution in the society where plight of Dalits is brushed aside with indifference, and construct an identity of their own for

them. For centuries, they have undergone harrowing and traumatic experiences. Their wishes and dreams have been insignificant as they had no right to dream for the world of joy and progress. They were meant to live and serve the people of the higher castes and die for them as well. But with the passage of time, there had been people in the Dalit community who realized the trauma and sufferings of the members of their community and they decided to give voice to their sufferings and pain, through literature.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, an autobiographical account of his birth and upbringing as an untouchable, or Dalit, in the newly independent India of the 1950s, is one of the first portrayals of Dalit life in India from an insider's perspective. The title of the book, '*Joothan*' encapsulates the pain, humiliation and oppression suffered by the Dalit community as a whole, which has been relegated to the bottom of India's social pyramid for years. Valmiki himself has stated his notion behind writing the autobiography in the preface to the Hindi edition of the book. According to him,

Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creation. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and compassionless towards Dalits.(vii)

He further writes:

"One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste."(valmiki18)

Valmiki says that the chuhras were not seen as human being but considered low than dogs, cats, cows or buffaloes. They were utilized until the work was done and after that throw them away .Valmiki portrays the picture of caste discrimination in *Joothan*. He asserts,

'Caste' is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, 'caste, being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard- bearers of this country's cultural heritage, did they decided which homes they would be born into?' Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom'. (Valmiki 133-134)

It is indeed shameful that despite 70 years of independence India has not been able to erase the curse of untouchability from our society. There are scores of laws against untouchability but in practice they have never been implemented honestly. Dalits have remained excluded not only from the economic and cultural mainstream of society but also from the ambit of the expression of their existential notions in the hierarchical order of the society.

Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* comprising some 139 odd pages presents an account of his birth and upbringing as an untouchable, marginalized or dalit. It gives an insight into the saga of sufferings and oppression which he has undergone in various phases and places of his life. Valmikiji opens his autobiography with a graphic presentation of the residence of Chuhda community which is located of Taga, also called Tyagis, hegemonic group-privileged and dominating one. At the very outset of the autobiography Chuhdas are depicted living on the border of the village separate from the uppercaste people. The condition of Dalit women is shown very miserable since the very beginning of the novel as there is no facilities for latrines in this Dalit basti and even the newly married brides have to sit in the open to relieve them:

“On the edge of the pond were the homes of Chuhdas. All the women of the village, young Girls, older women, even the newly married brides would sit in the open space behind these Homes at the edge of the pond to take a shit. Not just under the cover of darkness but even in Daylight. The purdah observing Tyagi women, their faces covered with their saris, shawls Around their shoulders, found relief in this open air latrine. They sat on Dabbowali's shores Without worrying about decency exposing their private parts” (Valmiki 1).

Omprakash Valmiki provides the pictures of penury from a closer quarter. He tells that in his village pattals (plates made of leaves) were generally used in the marriages to eat food. The pattals were thrown in the dustbins when all the people. The Chuhdas of this caste had to collect the left-over food from the pattals so that they may take it in their homes for their members of families. If in any marriage baratis don't leave enough scraps of food on their pattals then the people of this chuhrabasti called them gluttons:

“During a wedding when the gusts and the baratis, the bridegrooms' party, were eating their

meals, the Chuhras would sit outside with huge basket. After the baratis has eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in the Chuhras' basket, which they took home to save the Joothan, sticking to them. The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweetmeats and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make them happy. The joothan was eaten with a relish. The bridegroom's guests who didn't leave enough scraps on the pattals were denounced as gluttons." (Joothan 6)

Omprakash Valmiki has recorded many bitter experiences which he had to face during his childhood and youth simply because of his being a boy from the Chuhra community. All those insults which he suffered, physically tortured which he had to undergo are described by him to show how caste factor plays a significant role in the life of a Dalit Indian. He mentions that he grew in those days of the post independent India when people in general were not ready to accept the right even to primary education for the people of Dalit community. His father had to go to the primary school several times to request to the head master for the admission of Omprakash to the primary school. He experienced the discrimination and untouchability even within the four walls of the classroom. As he belonged from a lower poor Dalit class, he was called 'Chuhre Ka' (the son of a scavenger) by the students of the students and even his teachers also did not object it. He was beaten without any rhyme and reason at school. At the time of his examinations, Dalit children were not allowed to drink water from the glasses as Omprakash explains:

During the examinations we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass. (Joothan16)

He gives account of another episode where a story is being narrated by a teacher in the book *Joothan*. He is narrating a story of Guru Drona's poverty where his son *Ashvathama* got the flour dissolved in the water, in place of milk. The story has been taken from epic *Mahabharata* written by Ved Vyasa. Valmiki got curious and asked his teacher:

Master Saheb Ashwathama was given flour mixed in water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink mar? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't any epic poet ever write a word on our lives? (Joothan23)

Master saheb became infuriated when he listened the question. Valmiki described the incident in Joothan:

The whole class stared at me as though I had raised a meaningless point. Master Saheb screened, 'Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back.' The teacher ordered me to stand in the murga or rooster pose. This meant squatting on my haunches, then drawing my arms through my inner thighs, and pulling down my head to grasp my ear, a painful constricted position. Instead of carrying on with the lesson he was going on and on about my being Chuhra. He ordered a boy to get a long teak stick. 'Chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with dronacharya...Here, take this, I will write an epic on your body.' He had rapidly created an epic on my back with the swishes of his stick. That epic is still inscribed on my back. Reminding me of those hated days of hunger and hopelessness, this epic composed out of a feudalistic mentality is inscribed not just on my back but on each nerve of my brain.(Joothan23)

Valmiki recalls another incident when he met a girl named Savita . One day, she invited him at her home for a cup of tea. He asked Savita when he saw a scheduled caste candidate who was given a cup of tea in another pot. He asked her:

You had given him tea in a different cup?'

'Yes, the SCs and the Muslims who come to our house, we keep their dishes separate,' Savita replied evenly.

'Do you think this discrimination is right?' I asked. She felt the sharp edge in my voice now.

'Oh...why, are you mad? How can we feed them in the same dishes?'

'Why not? In the hotel...in the mess, everyone eats together. Then what is wrong in eating together in your home as well?' I tried to reason with her.

Savita defended the discrimination as right and justified by tradition. Her arguments were infuriating me. However, I remained calm. According to her, SCs were uncultured.

Dirty.’(Joothan97) Omprakash Valmiki’s “*Joothan*”: *A Dalit’s life* also narrates the painful experiences of his community. He writes:

“Why is my caste my only identity? Many friends hint at the loudness and arrogance of my writings. They insinuate that I have imprisoned myself in a narrow circle. They say that literary expression should be focused on the universal; a writer ought not to limit himself to a narrow confined terrain of life. This is my being Dalit and arriving at a point of view according to my environment and my socio-economic situation is being arrogant. Because in their eyes, I am only an SC the one who stands outside the door. (Joothan134)

Conclusion:

Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* is about the journey of a Dalit family struggling for education and status in society. Meanwhile; it is also the story of a Dalit family in search of Dalit dignity and identity. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, as an autobiography exhibits all the features and qualities of a true life story. But the relevance of this work is beyond the boundary of an autobiography since it stands as a symbol for the untouchable or Dalit community Dalit literature looks at the things from the Dalit’s point of view. These motives of Dalit literature are nicely brought out in *Joothan* by Valmikiji. He is the one who had suffered a lot socially, economically and culturally, and wrestled against all odds in order to cherish the dreams of his life.

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