



THE PORTRAIT OF TORTURE AND RESISTANCE IN "JOOOTHAN" BY OMPRAKASH VALMIKI

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Abstract

This Research Paper takes into account Omprakash Valmiki's "Joothan" as the image of resistance against oppression and struggle, a story about rule, control of higher class families and classes over lower class families and clashes in Indian social set up. The word *Jhoothan* is originally a word of Hindi language. The literal meaning of *Jhoothan* is the leftover of food on the plate, which is thrown into the dustbin or given away to animals. But others will take it as *Jhoothan* only if they eat the leftover food. This word also has the connotations of purity and pollution of the lower class families and classes in Indian social set up. In *Joothan* Om Prakash Valmiki tackles issues related to stigmatization of Dalits in Indian society, wherever they live. This shame is due to the factual truth that the inferiority of Dalits has settled in the mind of the high caste people, whose members have developed a unique kind of idioms, speeches and derogatory body language. Although, the Indian constitution has put an end to the discrimination based on the caste, but now also it persists in all parts of living and is deeply rooted in the mindset of the people. For centuries they have suffered depression and trauma. The Dalits have undergone unbearable sufferings and the same is very aptly depicted in *Jhoothan*, the autobiography written by Om Prakash Valmiki.

Keywords: Discrimination, Dalit Literature, caste system, trauma, oppression, resistance.

Introduction:

Dalit Literature

The unique piece of literature, representing the voice of the about the so called lower class termed as Dalits, which is an oppressed class of Indian Society under the caste system of India is called the Dalit Literature. It

occupies a distinct and an essential place in the Literature of India. The Dalit literature was evolved in the year 1960 and the later years. It began in the state of Maharashtra and initially the language was Marathi. But soon it spread in other Indian states and their languages through various literary forms of writings. It is said that

the Dalit Literature is more specific to India because is a product of the brutal system that has been existing in India for many hundred years.

Caste System: An Overview

India is a country that is growing on a very fast pace and progressing very fast in every sphere. countries of the world and it also has also the ethnic groups of people who follow and practice the caste system. When we talk about it we find the word *caste* is derivation from *casta* the word of Portuguese language which means identity by birth or the caste. Caste system in India has been deeply rooted in India since ancient times. Caste and untouchability are generally believed to have emerged from long term-competition for land, resource use and the culture among self-proclaimed *Aryans* when they came in India around in the early 1000s B.C. Over the time, these clashes and struggle developed the *chaturvarnasocial* system. The word *Varna* literally means colour and *Chaturvarna* means the four sects i.e. the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The Brahmins said to have placed themselves on the top of the social hierarchy. The Shudras were meant to serve the three higher sects of the society, the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. The Dalits or the Untouchables occupy a place with no clear borders and outside the scheme of Varna. They are considered unclean because of the work they do such as cleaning toilets, sweeping and taking out garbage and therefore called "untouchable." They were hired to do the work which working class people could not perform. Historically, the untouchables had no permission to go into the temples and the public places. Their work included disposing of dead animals or cleaning their dirt. The caste system was seen as an important weapon for maintaining cultural resemblance. Valmiki's narrative autobiography revolts against these unjust practices and tries to portray the oppression of caste that he observed. He spoke of number of humiliating incidents related to his life. When Valmiki returned to

Mumbai after visiting his family in Bale, the mafia was still on their trail. He gave the example of the Kulkarni family (a Brahmin family from Maharashtra). He stressed that his family is respected even if their ethnicity is unknown. One of his friends even warned him not to reveal his race. Valmiki tells Kulkarni's daughter Savita that she was the one who was nominated. She is shocked by this news and asks her not to tell this to her father. Until Om Prakash revealed his race, he was respected, but after his revelation, people of equal intelligence and like-minded people returned to him. Why do hegemonies and political classes boast about being killed by the weak? Why are the Hindus so harsh and discriminatory to Dalits? In *Joothan* several incidents have been described by Om Prakash Valmiki where people asked him about the ethnicity after a lengthy conversation. He also explained how a surname becomes a symbol of fame and how people's attitude towards it changes when they learn its ethnic name. Although discrimination has not stopped, Om Prakash believes that acceptance of one's life is an essential part of one's identity. However, his Dalit relatives and his opponents seem to have changed their minds on this demand. For Valmiki it was also a political matter. It was found that Dalits who faced domestic violence on a daily basis avoided committing suicide. It turns out that it is easier to change your identity or name to avoid abuse. Mahatma Gandhi called the untouchables Harijan, meaning "blessed," because Gandhi had the belief that the Harijans were rightly blessed by the sufferings they underwent and their poverty. Lately, many untouchables have negatively evaluated the characterization Harijan's by Gandhiji. Therefore they prefer to be called themselves not Harijans but Dalit, which means "oppressed."

The Dalits

Dalit means "crushed, broken or cut into pieces". The origin of the word is of the Sanskrit language word "*dal*," which is again adopted from the Hebrew language in which "*Dal*"

means "It can refer to both physical weakness and an insignificant position in society." Because of the caste system they fall prey to sufferings. Their lives are filled with shame, humiliation, insult, oppression and discrimination. They have endured pain and sufferings for hundreds of years. Their dreams and desires were of no importance as they couldn't think of a world full of happiness and prosperity. They were supposed to live and die for the service of the higher castes. However, as the time passed, awareness came about the ill treatment and sufferings of their community members and they decided to expose their traumatic experiences and sufferings through literary forms. The Dalit problems have been taken into account through various literary forms: novels, short stories, autobiographies, poems and essays. The pain of the Dalits is really unbearable. When we read the literature which is filled with the ill treatment, disgrace, torture and oppression of the Dalits, we truly understand their pain. The tool of Literature has become a very powerful for the Dalits to express their trauma and anguish over the discrimination and ill treatment they have undergone. The well known Dalit writers include Mulk Raj Anand, Lakshman Gaekwad, NamdeoDhasal, Mahasweta Devi, Sivakami, Basudev Sunani, Bama, Poonami, SharankumarLimbale, Om Prakash Valmiki etc. The Dalits show their pain very humbly and in very simple terms in the literature created by them. Soon this became the strong medium and tool of their resistance. In fact the Dalit literature expresses a symbolic communication to the members of Dalit community that until and unless they speak up against all the injustices and discriminations they have undergone, they will never gain a respectable place in the society.

About the Author

Om Prakash Valmiki was one of the most prominent Indian Dalit writers and poets who raised the issues related to the discrimination of Dalits in their writings strongly on a regular basis. He is very well known for his literary

masterpiece *Joothan* which is considered a great achievement in Dalit literature. Valmiki was born on 30th June, 1950 at Barla village in Muzzafarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh, a north Indian state with a large number of Dalit population. He served in the government ordnance factory under the Central Defence Ministry of India Government. After the retirement from government ordnance factory, he went to Dehradun and lived there until his death due to stomach cancer on 17th November, 2013.

Om Prakash Valmiki was tortured and mistreated as a Dalit child in the society he lived in. It was his good fortune that was born in a family in which everybody was concerned about him so much and loved him. The strong help and timely encouragement that he received from his family enabled him to confront the dangerous situations in his life specially of being a Dalit child. From a very tender age, Valmiki realized the value of studies in his life. This is why he has always been an excellent student, brilliant in his studies. The studies helped him become mentally strong man. Valmiki loved Chanda and later settled down his life marrying her. Initially the family opposed, but later on his father received and welcomed her as his daughter-in-law. When he got job appointment in the Government Ordnance Factory, there were government residential houses in the colony. But he was purposely not given a house in the residential Colony. He underwent pain and faced problems of all sorts in the beginning of their married life, but soon they overcame them all to begin a happy life after marriage. Other than his autobiography *Joothan* published in 1997, Om Prakash Valmiki also has published the three collections of poetry, *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka* in 1997, *Sadiyon ka Santaapin* 2000, *Ab Aur Nahin* in 2009; and he also penned two collections of stories *Salaam* in 2000 and *Ghuspethiyein* in 2004. He also wrote *Dalit Saahitya ka Saundaryshatra* in 2001, an account of *History of Valmiki Community Safai* in 2009 and one play *Do Chera* in 2009.

"Joothan"

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is a literary masterpiece of Dalit literature which in the year 1997 was firstly published in Hindi. Later on the English translated version by Arun Prabha Mukherjee was published in the year 2003. This is a narration of bringing up as an 'untouchable' starting in the year 1950, outside a typical village in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India. Told as a series of touching short stories, *Joothan* is also a remarkable record of a rare journey to India that takes a boy from the condition of extreme poverty to fame of an author and well known social critic. In this novel 'Joothan', Valmiki recounts the kind of discrimination he faced in the school a number of times. He says: "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" (J16). The portrayal of the life sketch of Om Prakash Valmiki is of a Dalit or rather an untouchable of the 1950s in a country like India afresh after independence. "Jhoothan" means the scraps of food left or the left over food on a plate which is supposed to be thrown to the garbage or animals. For centuries the Dalits of India have been compelled to eat *jhoothan* i.e. the leftover on the plates of the rich. The word 'Jhoothan' evokes the pain, shame, and wretched life of the Dalit community forcefully made to stay at the lowest position of social caste system prevalent in India. Though the evil of untouchability was already done away with, way back in 1949, but the Dalits still suffer caste discrimination, torture, economically deprived and stigmatized.

In the very beginning of his autobiography Om Prakash Valmiki states, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionate towards Dalits." (Jvii) Valmiki painfully narrates the way the whole Dalit community suffers and depends on the *Jhoothan* i.e. food scrape usually thrown away by the high

class society castes in return for the unfortunately unpaid labour done by the Dalits. The whole Dalit community was dependent on the mercy and compassion of the upper castes who exploited them very badly instead of paying them for their hard labour. The title of the book '*Joothan*' literally means food left on the plate of eater, usually supposed to be thrown away for the garbage dump. However, such food is labeled as '*jhoothan*' when somebody other than the original eater would eat it. Om Prakash Valmiki describes the duty that he was assigned to safeguard the *jhoothan* kept to dry after collection from the plates from animals, chickens and crows etc. This past history troubles him a lot and he gets filled with agony, grief, and insult even in the present time also. All through the autobiography, being a Dalit, time and again he reiterates his experiences of pain of discriminatory and shameful treatment he faced because of the untouchability was practiced on a regular basis. He further states, "I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions, I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door." (J16)

In citing one more example, Valmiki describes about himself that he was forced to remain out of the laboratory room of chemistry department of the School 'on some pretext or the other'. He made attempts to lodge complaint about it with the Head of the School regarding this but all in vain. Instead of taking any action against the teacher concerned, contrarily he was not allowed to participate in any lab class and was made stand out of the Chemistry lab for the whole year. Then he writes, "Not only did I do very poorly in the lab tests in the board exam, I also got low marks in the oral, even though I had answered the examiner's questions quite correctly." (J 65)

In *Joothan*, whatever Om Prakash Valmiki narrates the days when he was a child in the village of Barla in Muzzafarnagar district of

Uttar Pradesh is harsh reality of his life as a Dalit child. He writes about the unjust and discriminatory behaviour towards him done by the school authority when he was at school only because of him being a Dalit or an untouchable. He further writes, "I had to sit away from the others in the class, and that too on the floor. The mat ran out before door....sometimes they would beat me without any reason" (J2). When he was in Class VI, he was asked to sweep and clean the classrooms and the playground by the head master. He says, "The playground was way larger than my small physique could handle and in cleaning it, my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. Dust had gone inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. Headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water" (J5).

Valmiki was lucky that he had a family that stood behind him with whole hearted support in his studies and in the advancement of his career and get out of the dirty casteism based life. The novel is dedicated to his father and mother. His father and mother are both depicted as heroic figures in the autobiography. Their desire was that their child could be freed from the shackle of this shameful and disgraceful life and henceforth they struggled lifelong for his security and progress with great amount of courage. The father of Valmiki used to call him Munshiji. This itself is obviously showing his father's ambitions for his son. Regarding this Valmiki shares an incident where the headmaster makes him to sweep the playground of the school. He says, "Just then my father passed by the school. He stopped abruptly when he saw me sweeping the school compound. He called me, 'Munshiji, what are you doing?' When I saw him I burst out sobbing. He entered the school compound and came towards me. Seeing me crying, he asked, 'Munshiji, why are you crying? Tell me, what has happened?' "I told the whole story to my father: that the teachers had been making me sweep for the last three days; that they did not let me enter the classroom at all." His father confronted the teachers and then walking away from the school

holding Valmiki's hand, he said loudly enough for the head master to hear, "You are a teacher...So I am leaving you. But remember this much, Master This Chuhre ka will study right here....in this school. And not just him, but there will be more coming after him"(J6).

His father had all sorts of weaknesses, but the decisive turn that he gave his future that day has had great impact on Valmiki's personality. One of the most powerful moments in the novel is when Valmiki's mother overturns a basket full of *jhoothan* before Mr. Tyagi, against humiliation. Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty pattals and said, "You are taking a basket full of *jhoothan*. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going." That instant she emptied the basket right there and said to Sukhdev Singh, "Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis tomorrow morning" (J11). She confronted him like a "lioness" when he pounced on to hit her. This act of defiance by Valmiki's mother sows the seeds of rebellion in the tender heart of the child Valmiki.

Conclusion

Om Prakash Valmiki suffered a lot in his lifetime. He had very bad experiences of the life. However he says "Times have changed. But there is something somewhere that continues to irk" (J134). *Joothan* is a book that voices the demand of the Dalits for their rightful place in the society. He says, "Today caste remains a pre-eminent factor in social life. As long as people don't know that you are a Dalit, things are fine. The moment they find out your caste, everything changes." He questions, "Why is my caste my only identity?" (J134) According to Valmiki, *Joothan* is a manifesto for evolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness. The novel contrasts its readers with different questions about their own humanity and invites them to join the universal projects of human liberation. In *Joothan* Valmiki writes: "We need an ongoing struggle and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both

in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change."

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