



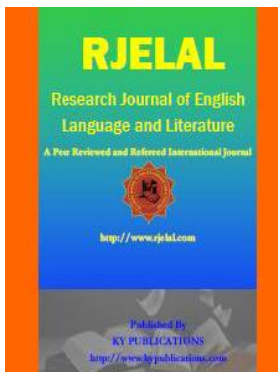
JOOZHAN: A DALIT'S LIFE BY OMPRAKASH VALMIKI: AN EMBODIMENT OF DALIT RESISTANT AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature is the literary assertion of Dalit self-hood. Whereas post-colonial literature in Indian subcontinent incorporates exclusively the dominant Hinduistic literature, Dalit literature with a definitive view to engender justice, emancipation and empowerment in all possible sense of the terms for the Dalit-bahujans, encompasses an inclusive treatment of Dalit-life in this country. *Joozhan: A Dalit's Life* by Omprakash Valmiki is a veridical exercise of this Dalit literary sensibility and the present paper attempts a humble exploration of that alternative literary aesthetics which, underscoring a resistance to the hegemonic mainstream literature, find itself embodied in *Joozhan* in particular and entire Dalit literature in general.

Key-words: Dalit self-hood, Hinduistic literature, justice, emancipation, empowerment, alternative literary aesthetics.



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INTRODUCTION

The thematic concern of the post-1947 Indian literature is largely preoccupied with the anti-colonial consciousness, freedom movement, the glory of civilisation, 'tension between tradition and modernity' and thus it fails to grapple with the greater social reality of this country which is scarred with myriad forms of 'internal' discrimination based on caste, class or gender. The pan-Indian nationalist movement against the British rule during the colonial period had essentially been Gandhian in spirit which in order to organise a united force is said to have blurred some grim and grave inner crises of this land one of the severest among which is untouchability. Consequently despite the establishment of a constitutional Govt. after independence, the 'untouchables' who comprise the major section of the Indian population have got excluded from the mainstream social, political,

economic, and even literary discourse of this country. Untouchability has purposefully been consecrated through the institutionalization of caste-system which has its scripted foundational roots in Hinduism. Dr. B.R Ambedkar, the first Law minister and Chairman of the Drafting Committee for the Constitution, who spearheaded the anti-caste intellectual movement during the formation of this nation-state, articulated this inextricable nexus between Hinduism and untouchability:

"It is true that Hinduism can absorb many things. The beef-eating Hinduism (or strictly speaking Brahminism which is the proper name of Hinduism in its earlier stage) absorbed the non-violence theory of Buddhism and became a religion of vegetarianism. But there is one thing which Hinduism has never been able to do- namely, to adjust itself to absorb the untouchables or to remove the bar of untouchability."

Evidently this hierarchical social order in India has traditionally been conducive to the homogenizing process of post-colonial subalternization and Dalit literature registering its strong protest against that process has emerged as a powerful 'writing back' against the canonical supremacy of Hinduistic literature in this sub-continent.

Valmiki and Dalit literary Aesthetics

Omprakash Valmiki is an assertive voice of that alternative perspective of literary aesthetics which has been relegated to the oblivion by the epistemological hegemony through ages. He imbibed the succulence of great literature by writers like Pasternak, Hemingway, Victor Hugo, Pierre Louis, Tolstoy, Pearl Buck, Turgenev, Dostoevsky but his literary sensibility is more convincingly indebted to Dr. Ambedkar's biography, Marxist literature and the writings of Marathi Dalit writers like Daya Pawar, Namdev Dhashal, Raja Dhale, Gangadhar Pantavane, Baburo Bagul, Keshav Meshram et al. Arun Prabha Mukherjee whose English translation of Valmiki's Hindi text has brought *Joothan* in the world forum for aboriginal studies precisely recounts Valmiki's this radical view of aesthetics. Mukherjee refers to his suspicion in the essentialist philosophy of Kalatmakta or formal beauty and Sarvabhoomikata or universality 'as touchstone for judging literary merit.' Literature is neither a luxurious escape hatch to evade the social realities nor a 'tool' to exclude the story of the common man in order to achieve universality. The very definition of literature as distilled through the consciousness of a Dalit writer like Valmiki unequivocally takes a humanist stance: 'Literature is that discourse which stands on the side of a human being who is oppressed, who is in great peril, who wants to live. Literature should infuse him with the urge to live. Literature should shake him up, teach him to do battle, not weaken him, not make him submit to hegemony, not enslave him. We need to free ourselves from the order surrounding us. For me, good literature is that which wakens us towards that freedom.' (P-138) Dalit literature with this emancipatory vision debunks the age old mythologization of Hinduistic literature. In the post-script to the text *Joothan*, Arun Prabha Mukherjee reminisces Valmiki's even more radical takes on

Budhha, Premchand and Satyajit Roy. He prioritises the texts that are deliberately left out from the university syllabi and refers to the issues that are scarcely cultivated in the prevalent socio-political discourse. With the definitive aim of transforming the caste-ridden society or subverting the hierarchical social order *Joothan* and the entire corpus of Dalit literature propose a literary aesthetic that is fused with the project of human liberation. Dalit writing by creating a literary space seeks to establish that social, political and cultural tolerance which allows the subaltern to speak.

Dalit Autobiography

Dalit autobiography or life writing, aptly argues P.K Nayar, is less about the Dalit individual than about the entire community or caste. He says 'it is a collective biography of a people that have been structurally subordinated for centuries.' He favours to call these autobiographies 'testimonio, an atrocity narrative by witnesses' because a Dalit autobiography is an author's reliving of his 'traumatic experiences of the past'. Therefore Arun Prabha Mukherjee quite justifiably opines that Dalit autobiographies challenge the post modernists' claim that autobiography's truth is 'constructed'. *Joothan* for this reason demands careful attention from its readership since it is a veritable narration not only of Omprakash's own life but also of the life of entire Chuhra community. However Valmiki divulges the queer psychological hesitations he felt when he was asked for the first time to contribute a few pages about his experience as a Dalit in autobiographical form for a book titled '*Harijan se Dalit*'. His friends and well-wishers from his own community forbade him to write any autobiographical account since they apprehended it might run the risk of bringing about an abrupt end to his literary career. Dalit's life is too true a social reality to be acknowledged publicly. Dalit's voice which has forcefully been gagged over the years by dominating power structures (both external and internal) is deemed to be a serious threat to the status quo of the state at any age. Though Valmiki ultimately decided to publish the 'truth' of his life, he admits that 'in the process of writing these words a lot has remained unsaid. I did not manage to put it all down. It was beyond my power. You can call it my

weakness.’ (viii) Not unexpectedly, Valmiki in the text manifestly distances himself from the upper class/caste people and sides with the Dalits and this dissection has been stamped with the use of the pronouns like ‘they’ and ‘we’ for the upper class/castes and the Dalits respectively. Understandably this reinforces the Dalit ideology of self-representation and of protest against the homogenisation of diversity in peoples.

Joothan: A portrait of Dalit-society

Joothan quite in the tradition of Bildungsroman narrative traces out the growing up of Valmiki from an untouchable child to an educated Dalit activist. The non-linear narration of the text is grounded upon his memories of that life which is ‘excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences’. The text true to its protestant attitude towards predominant social values undertakes the form of a questionnaire. Umpteen numbers of questions that the text poses do have a seasonable socio-political relevance with considerable subversive potential. According to Mukherjee ‘one of the distinctive aspects of *Joothan* which marks it as a Dalit text, is its interrogative discourse. The text is full of questions that demand an answer.’ It portrays how the author’s caste i.e. Chuhra used to crop up as a colossal impediment at each step of the trajectory of his evolution. The graphic description of his painful life in Chuhra community in Barla, a suburb of Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh brings out the reality of the extent to which caste-system operates its oppressive measures in this democratic state. Valmiki chronicles the insalubrious and inhumane environment of the locale of the Chuhra community in the outskirts of the Tyagi dominated Barla village. *Joothan* is indeed a documented Dalit history which veraciously destabilizes the nationalist Gandhian ideology that underpins the caste system for maintaining the social order intact since the inception of the civilization. Valmiki connotes the axiomatic Gandhi-Ambedkar debate over ‘caste’ when he says:

‘The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights this was the environment of my childhood. If the people who call the caste system an ideal social arrangement had to live in

this environment for a day or two, they would change their mind.’ (P-01)

The subhuman existence of the untouchables in the ‘Chuhra basti’, the insurmountable plight of the people, the affliction of the down-trodden, the hunger, pain and the groan of the outcastes all have connotatively been encapsulated in the title ‘Joothan’ itself. For innumerable menial jobs that needed hard physical labour like scavenging, reaping and harvesting, disposing of the dead cattle, skinning the butchered animal the outcastes were paid no wages or utterly low wages. This necessitated for them to depend on ‘joothas’- the leftovers, the scraps; Valmiki reminds with shame and repentance that even ‘the joothan was eaten with a lot of relish.’ This is the gorgon facet of exploitation which knows no bounds at the hands of the privileged upper class/caste masters in the present neo-colonial framework. Moreover the outcastes were treated as untouchables in all religious upper castes and the author mentions that ‘The behaviour of (this) Muslim Tagas was just like that of the Hindu Tagas.’ (P-03) The hypocrisy of these upper-caste Tagas who were steeped in the quagmire of turpitude, adultery, usurpation has been bewrayed by Valmiki with factual evidences. He says ‘At such moments I would think of all the Tyagis who came in the darkness of the night to the Bhangi basti to eat pork. ..Those who came to eat meat secretly at night in day light observed untouchability in front of everybody... One of these was Teja Taga...His interest rates were so high that one could spend a whole life time paying the interest and the principal would remain untouched.’(P-18) Even the village priest Vaidy Satyanaryana Sharma too had been a depraved money lender. Local police administration had been an accomplice with the upper class/caste people in all these unlawful activities of exploitation and usurpation and Valmiki relates ‘Police constables would forcibly take away poultry from the basti. There was no place to make a complaint; instead some Tagas would cooperate with the police in this robbery.’(P-38) The text nullifies Gandhiji’s claim that the untouchables are part of ‘the Hindu fold’ since it points out that the deities worshipped by the Dalits are ‘different from Hindu deities and their

names won't be found in any Purana even if one searches hard.'(P-26) Dalits worship Jaharpir at Janmashtami and Mai Madaran during Deepawali in lieu of Lord Krishna and goddess Lakshmi respectively. (P-40) Valmiki identifies the politics of Gandhi in naming the Dalits as Harijan for his reading of Ambedkar convinces him that '...by naming the untouchables Harijans Gandhi had not helped them to join the national mainstream but had saved the Hindus from becoming a minority.'(P-72)

Joothan-education for the Dalits

Valmiki's academic experience is symptomatic of a Dalit's struggle to fit into the hostile upper-caste educational system of this country. He deems himself unfortunate enough to have come into contact with some casteist brutes as his teachers like Kaliram, the Headmaster who had once compelled young Omprakash to sweep the entire school premises, Brajpal Singh Tyagi and Fauz Singh Tyagi who were 'cruel casteists', Phool Singh Tyagi, a 'ruffian' all of whom had contributed to inflict a nightmarish jolt upon the author's young psyche. The promiscuity of Master Vedpal Tyagi, erstwhile a teacher and later a clerk, betrayed the sanctimoniousness of the Tyagi people. These Tyagi teachers used to batter the untouchable pupils almost like 'goondas'. Valmiki recalls a great number of Tyagi teachers who used to swear in filthy words about mothers and sisters, used to sexually abuse young pupil, and were, like Omdatta Tyagi, nothing but 'illiterate feudal lord'(P-63) in attitude. However Valmiki reckons with reverence his father who ardently desired his son to surpass his caste by being educated, some of his teachers who in spite of belonging to upper-caste were good at heart like Yogendra Tyagi and Chamanlal Tyagi, and some humane class-mates but for whose patronage, he concedes, he would not have been able to acquire formal education. Valmiki also unmasks the so-called educated urban middle class peoples' attitude to the untouchables. His love-affair with Savita Kulkarni who hailed from a Maharashtrian Brahmin family got throttled just for his caste. He mentions a large number of urban educated people who were in some way or the other 'unhappy' with his surname. He reminds the

callousness of Mr. Gupta, training in-charge at Jabalpur. He cites how his 'caste' soiled the normalcy in relationship with so many people like Deshpande in Ambarnath, Dr. Naidu, Head of the Hindi Department at Nagpur University, Dr. Sukhvir Singh, Reader in Delhi University's Shivaji college, Harikishan Santoshi and Sardar Gyan Singh. Many of them advised him to change his surname to suppress his caste. Valmiki recognises this as 'a terrible crisis of identity' among educated Dalits.

Conclusion

Joothan; A Dalit's Life by Omprakash Valmiki inspires us to celebrate such simple and impeccable truth as '...depriving human beings of human rights on account of their birth is not justifiable on any grounds.'(P-133) He therefore proposes to develop a 'consciousness', both 'in the outside world and in our hearts', which would evolve out a revolutionary social change. Dalit literature that has been defined by Sharan Kumar Limbale as 'writing about dalits by dalit writers with a dalit consciousness' is crucially conducive to this process of evolution.

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