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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. In recent decades Dalit writing has emerged as dynamic tool for the representation of Dalit people. Literature written by Dalit writers presents the pain and suffering of the Dalits in great detail. Dalit writing which deals with the suffering, caste discrimination, injustice, deprivation, economic deprivation and humiliation of dalits. Dalit literature is never a matter of aestheticism but it is a part of political movement. It is a literature calling for a change, and the authenticity of the Dalits can be only represented by the Dalits.

In Dalit writing autobiography remains a favourite genre. As Dr. Jonson has opined that, "no one was better qualified to write his life than himself". An autobiography generally arouses from the lived experiences and it is an account of firsthand experience of a person's life by him or herself. The present paper is an attempt to explore the representation of social reality of casteism through Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan*. *Joothan* directly records in first person narrative technique, the painful experience which charred his life and which also records his act of resistance and his will to survive. Despite the focus on poverty, suffering and untouchability there is zest for life, deep optimism and intense human sympathy which shows his writing has emerged as powerful weapon to explore Dalit's identity.

"Autobiographies are part of a literary genre that brings personal accounts of life in public domain. They incite others too to relate with their human emotions and circumstances which lived-up of the autobiography writer. Autobiographies serve different times and if autobiographies of Dalit

writers are called as a narrative of pain, it carries certain historical truth" (Vaibhav Web).

Valmiki's *Joothan* depicts his life as an untouchable who remains on the margin, on the periphery, economically and socially. His identity remains invisible to him. This is originally reflected in Valmiki's experience of pain. In the village where caste identity is openly known and acknowledged, pain is experienced bluntly as forced exclusion or even as physical violence.

As Valmiki narrates the headmaster forced him out of the class asking him to sweep the whole school premises. When on the third day, he quietly sneaked back to the classroom, the headmaster hounded him out using the most foul language.

Abey Chure Ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding . . . your mother . . . The headmaster has pounced on my neck. The pressure of his fingers was increasing. As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck he dragged me out of the class and threw me on the ground. He screamed: ' Go sweep the whole playground. . . Otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of the school" (5)

Valmiki recalls how when the whole class would study he was made to sweep the whole school. This complete scene of his real life demonstrates that it is a conspiracy against a Dalit child to keep him away from the education. "The upper caste too realised the significance of education in the lives of the low caste, that is why they used all kinds of strategies to prevent Omprakash Valmiki from sitting in the classroom" (149). He was called Chuhra by his classmates and sometimes he was beaten by them without any reason. No doubt poverty and caste were the main reasons of Dalit child exploitation. He also tells how when once he asked why Vyas, the poet of the epic the *Mahabharata* who gave powerful portrayal of Dronacharya's poverty made no mention of the poverty of Dalits' in epics.

The whole class stared at me. As though I had raised a meaningless point. Master Saheb screamed on my question " Chure ke, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya. . . Here take this, "I will write an epic on your back" and he rapidly created an epic on my back with the swishes of his stick" (23)

In another instance when he was preparing for his tenth class Maths examination he was forcibly taken by an upper caste Tyagi to work in his fields. In another incident he recalls he was given less marks in viva and practical of Chemistry even though he did well in the examination. All this shows upper caste politics to keep away Dalits from education. " There is a tension between the institutional ideology of meritocracy (that students are graded accordingly to performances rather than caste identity) and Valmiki's own experience as a Dalit student" (Beth Web).

In spite of hardships and sufferings in his educational career he has mentioned in *Joothan* poor economic conditions were also a major obstacle in his pursuit of education. " I returned home with a sad heart. There was something bubbling inside me. The majestic building of the Inter college was constantly before my eyes. As soon as I returned home. I said to my mother ' Ma I want to go to school' There were tears in my eyes. Seeing my tears my mother also started to cry" (14). Thus we see how author describes his childhood

days full of humiliation, degradation and deprivation. " These incidents attacks the basic of this caste-discrimination in a variety of ways, but especially through a stable focus on the 'factual' recounting of experience of discrimination" (Beth Web).

On the other hand Valmiki mirrors Hindu society and finds there is no space for woman's own identity as we also find the character of Omprakash Valmiki's mother in his autobiography *Joothan*. She is not called by her own name people of the village called her 'khajoorwali'. Because she came from khajur after her marriage. "Everybody called my mother Khajoorwali. Perhaps she too had forgotten her real name" (58).

Thus again the question of identity is explored by Valmiki through his mother's character. An incident described in his autobiography displays the power of mother. Once Valmiki goes with his mother to the house of a high caste man to collect the left-overs of the food eaten by the Baratis with the intention of getting a good meal. But the humiliating words of a high caste man Sukhdev Singh deeply hurt them. When Omprakash Valmiki's mother asks for some sweets for the children. Sukhdev Singh points at the basket full of dirty pattals and says, " You are taking a basket of joothan. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, Churi. Pick your basket and get going" (11).

These words so hurt his mother that she throws the joothan in the basket and never again goes to an upper caste house to collect joothan. This bold gesture of his mother also instils confidence and self-respect in Omprakash Valmiki as a child.

That night the mother Goddess Durga entered my mother eyes. It was the first time I saw my mother get so angry. She emptied the basket right there. She said to Sukhdev Singh, ' Pick it up and put it inside your house feed it to the Baratis tomorrow morning. She gathered me and my sister and left like an arrow. Sukhdev Singh pounced on her to hit her, but my mother had confronted him like a lioness. Without being afraid" (11)

This portrayal of the mother's protest highlights the inner strength in a woman as mother and her love and protection for her children. Valmiki's *Joothan* gives voice to the women victims who often has to suffer silently in the name of culture and social practices. And as such, "Valmiki has not only given an authentic voice of Dalits, But he has also created a manifesto for the revolutionary transformation of an oppressed and stigmatized community" (Seth Web). Valmiki's mother struggles in her life for livelihood and to provide food for her children. Her life was extremely hard. Along with these fields labours my mother also cleaned the baithaks and the ghers of eight and ten Tagas, both Hindu and Muslims.

"Dalit women fear not only personal and social dishonour, but even the right to minimum physical safety while within the home or "private" sphere women may suffer from verbal and physical abuses at the hands of their fathers and husbands, outside in the "public" realm forced unpaid and often indentured labour conditions are compared by sexual harassments and a real risk to physical life. . . their interest are either pushed aside or lost within serious male power politics" (220).

The inclusion of the suffering of a Dalit woman in his autobiography indicates that Valmiki upholds values of justice, equality and dignity for all human beings. His basic struggle of survival and dignity was foremost to him. And his basic philosophy was that the true picture of a Dalit's life and anguish can only be captured by a Dalit. *Joothan* originates inhuman and social injustice and he depicts this with great sensitivity with the desire to make a plea for change. Valmiki voices his anger and protest not only against the open and subtle persistence of social and cultural inequalities but against their surpassed permanence.

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