

## Resistance and Assertion in Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

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### Abstract:

*Dalit Literature is the literature about the Dalits, the oppressed class under Indian caste system forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. Though Dalit narratives have been a part of the Indian social narratives since 11th century onwards, with works like Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam portraying Dalit women like half-naked and sexually exploitable and praising the killing of thousands of Dalits on "Kazhumaram" in the hands of Gnanasambandan, Dalit literature emerged into prominence and as a collective voice after 1960, starting with Marathi, and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages, through self-narratives, like poems, short stories and most importantly autobiographies known for their realism, and for its contribution to Dalit politics.*

**Key words:** Dalit literature, Indian Caste System, Dalit politics, autobiography.

Dalits literature deals with not only about Harijans, Mangs, Mallas, Chambhars, Pulayas but also the upper caste people who are suppressed by the domineering people. The writers say the emergence of low-caste literature has taken place alongside a broader growth of consciousness and activism, particularly in urban India. As an individual a dalit cannot forget his past. The humiliation tries to remember his past. A writer should speak

about his people for his people. A writer, who writes about the exploitation, speaks not as an individual, but as a member of a community and must therefore, avoid individuated expression

The marginalized people had to suffer because of the lack of proper food and nourishment. They had to tolerate a lot. They got maltreatment from the upper castes people. They had muffled their voice. The people who were poor and lived in the slum basti and had no means to earn proper bread for their children were compelled to tolerate everything from rich people. The honour, respect, and self-esteem had been only its names for them. They had their own identity as poor, weak and dirty men and had no respect in society. Omprakash Valmiki asserts:

Most people of our basti suffered everything in silence. Honour and prestige had no meaning for them. Being threatened and controlled by the higher-ups was on everything occurrence for the basti dwellers (1)

The aim of this paper is to show how a dalit writer uses his autobiography as a means of assertion against untouchability by looking at a well-known dalit autobiography of Hindi *Joothan* (1997) by Om Prakash Valmiki. The paper attempts to show the resistance of a marginalized group against the system of domination and exploitation. Barbara Harlow writes,

If resistance poetry challenged dominant and hegemonic discourse of an occupying or colonizing power by attacking the symbolic foundations of that power and erecting symbolic structures of its own resistance narratives go further still analyzing the relations of power which sustain the system of domination and exploitation.

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)

In the book, *Joothan-A Dalit's life*, Om Prakash Valmiki writes, "One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste". With this statement, Valmiki highlights the rigidity of the caste system in India that has resulted in the socio-economic oppression of thousands across India over centuries merely because of the "lesser caste" to which they belong. The title of this autobiographical account, *Joothan*, encapsulates the pain, the humiliation and the poverty of the "untouchable" Chuhra community of Uttar Pradesh, to which the other belongs. The untouchable or Dalits who were social outcaste not only had to rely on the joothan of others but also had to relish it. The treatment meted out to them was worse than that of animals.

Valmiki expresses the realities of societies which is delineated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, translator of *Joothan* from Hindi into English, "*Joothan* had a visceral impact on me because in writing his life story of being born in the Chuhra caste and growing up in Barla in North India, Valmiki spoke of the realities and contradictions of my society that had been shut out with thick walls of denial".

In *Joothan*, Valmiki describes the harsh reality of his childhood in the village in Barla district of Uttar Pradesh. He writes about the ill treatment meted out to him when he was at school because he was an untouchable. He describes the trauma he went through when he was asked to spend three days sweeping the school courtyard instead of accompanying his classmates belonging to the higher castes in the study class.

There is a story which is narrated by a teacher in the book *Joothan*. He is narrating a story of Drona's poverty where his son Ashatthama got the flour dissolved in the water, in lieu of milk. The story has been written in an epic named

*Mahabharata* by Vyasa. Valmiki was listening very attentively the story of Drona, Valmiki enquired to teacher,

Master Saheb Ashwatthama 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 wrote a word on our lives?

Master saheb became furious when he listened the questions of such types and he was about to response the boy as he asked no questions but wanted his daughter's hand. 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. (23)

Valmiki struggles through his life. He 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 the rigidly and narrow-mindedness of casteist India, which is as relevant today as it was in the early part of the last century".

Valmiki's objective here doesn't stop at evoking

compassion towards the oppressed Dalits in the mind of the reader but questions, "Why is my caste my only identity?" This one query leads the reader into introspection. In India caste has always defined the socio-political scenario of the country whether it is the debate on the reservation policy for government jobs and education to aid the socially and economically backward classes or political gimmickry, everything has and undertone of caste and religion.

Valmiki writes that despite government undertaking for the development of oppressed classes, through reservations their achievements are hardly noticed and are ridiculed often. Many of us, at some stage of our lives have been discriminated against because we belong to go community and due to our beliefs and practices. The mention of caste, community, and religion on admission forms to school and college is one such example.

When Valmiki passed his seventh class, he was in top four students. Noticeably he was a bright and an intelligent student of the class. His success was the root cause of jealousy in the eye of upper caste's students and teachers. Which is why, one day Valmiki was going to school followed by Brajesh a Taga's son. He (Brajesh) was an arrogant boy. He hadn't any respect for intelligence but for higher caste people. He said to Valmiki, 'You will remain a Chuhra.....however much you study' it seems that people had no respect in societies who belong to dalit community whether they were wise or intelligent. There was respect for community not for people.

*Joothan* presents those experiences that did not find a place in literary representation. Experiences like Valmiki's birth and growing up in the untouchable caste of Chuhra, the heroic struggle that he wages to survive this preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution, and his transformation into a speaking subject and recorder of the oppression and exploitation he endured, not only as an individual but also as a member of a stigmatized and oppressed

community, had never been represented in the annals of Hindi literature. He, therefore, has broken new ground, mapped a new territory. Besides a few stray poems and short stories by canonical Hindi writer, which portray Dalit characters as tragic figures and objects of pathos, Dalit representations are conspicuously absent from contemporary Hindi literature.

The term *joothan*, actually carries a lot of historic baggage. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi advised untouchable to stop accepting *joothan*. Ambedkar, an indefatigable documenter of atrocities against Dalits, shows how the high caste villagers could not tolerate the fact that Dalits did not want to accept their *joothan* anymore and threatened them with violence if they refused it. Valmiki has thus recuperated a word from the painful past of Dalit history which resonates with multiple ironies. Gandhi's paternalistic preaching, which assumed that accepting *joothan* was simply a bad habit the untouchables could discard, when juxtaposed against Ambedkar's passionate exhortation to fellow untouchables to not accept *joothan* even when its refusal provoked violence, press against Valmiki's text, proliferating in multiple meanings.

Valmiki has shown caste discrimination in *Joothan*. He has depicted his bearing and his sufferings in *Joothan*. There is caste discrimination in India. In another country it is but in a different way. It is existed in India since ancient period. Someone has related it to religion and Hinduism but as well as scholars think there is no connection between caste and religion. It may be understad by the below excerpton:

Caste has nothing to do with religion... it is harmful to both spiritual and growth. *Varna* and *Ashrama* are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of *Varna* teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling...The calling of a Brahman-aspiritual teacher-and of a scavenger are equal and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man. (5)

Valmiki presents his experiences. There is caste system in India even today. One day Valmiki was invited to go to the teacher's house to take some grain. There, they (His friend and Valmiki) were welcomed with open arm. The elders of the house offered them meal. As soon as they finished their meal, they were asked a question which revealed their identity. And then they were tied with rope to the tree. The people of the upper caste behaved with them as they have raped an upper class girl. He asserts:

I answered his question, 'We are of the Chuhra caste.'

Both exclaimed together, 'Chuhra?' Lifting a heavy stick from underneath the charpai, the elder hit Bhikhuram on his back. He had a lot of strength and Bhikhuram crumbled. Obscenities began to rain from the elder's mouth. His eyes were fierce and his skinny body was harbouring the devil. We had dared to eat in their dishes and sit on their charpai, a crime in his eyes. I was standing below the porch, frightened. The elder was screaming and his voice had drawn a crowd. Many people suggested that we should be tied to a rope and hung from the tree. (51)

The notion of caste system has not been changed if even the lower caste people got education. They were behaved worse than the beasts. They had no value in the society. An animal was worshipped in those days but person who belongs to the lower caste had no place in the society.

Fauza was shouting and swearing: 'Abey Chuhre ke... Just because he has learnt to read a little he has gotten above himself...Abey, don't forget who you are...' (57)

When Valmiki was ill-treated in the upper class society he began to curse himself being born into a Hindu family. Though 'it must be recognized that there never has been a common Indian Culture, that historically there have been three Indians, Brahmanic India, Buddhist India and Hindu India, each with its own culture...It must be recognized that the history of India before the Muslim invasions is the history of a mortal conflict

between Bramanism and Buddhism.<sup>275</sup> Valmiki asserts:

But something came to a boil inside me,.... 'Neither am I a Hindu.' If I were really a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill me up with caste inferiority over the smallest things? I also wondered why does one have to be a Hindu in order to be a good being...I have seen and suffered the cruelty of Hindus since childhood. Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits? (41)

Valmiki met a girl named Savita. She invited him at her home for a cup of tea. He asked to savita when he saw an SC candidate who was given a cup of tea in another pot. He enquired,

'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.' (57)

Valmiki questioned himself that what is Dalit? The answer can be explained as members of the scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.

To reach before the conclusion it can be said that Valmiki suffered a lot in his lifetime. He had bad experience of the life. Therefore, that one of the most powerful moments of the text is Valmiki's mother's overturning of the basketful of



joothan after she is humiliated by Sukhdev Singh Tyagi. Her act of defiance sows the seeds of rebellion in the child Valmiki. The *Joothan* is dedicated to her and Valmiki's father, both portrayed as heroic figures, which desired something better for their child and fought for his safety and growth with tremendous courage. Valmiki's father's ambitions for his son are evident in the nickname, Munshiji, that he gives Valmiki reses on their shoulders to become the first high school graduates suffered by them and other Dalits.

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