

Voice of Resistance: Exploring Dalit Aesthetics in Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan

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ABSTRACT

Dalit writing in India goes back to the times when there was no social awareness about the discrimination as it was putatively viewed as 'God-ordained' and 'natural'. The embedded narratives contained therein, frame psychological patterns of the social scenario of those days and power play of then and today. Privation from the mainstream has presumably led to aggression and complexities in the minds of the people who were excluded from land's ritualistic, religious practices for several millennia. Dalit writers of today are trying to give voice to the subaltern and people subsisting on the fringes of the society. Gayatri Spivak's 'Can Subaltern Speak' is now no more a rhetoric question in the sense Dalit writers are being included in today's discourse. They are able to make their space at least in their works which can reach to the masses. Present research article aims to examine the work Joothan, the poignant and much acclaimed autobiographical work penned by Omprakash Valmiki for its incisive tone and unsettling narrative which recounts, in no uncertain terms, the precarious and intersectional experience of Dalits.

Keywords: Varna System, Harijan, Scheduled Castes, Social Construct, Intersectionality, Subaltern, Hegemony, Stratification

INTRODUCTION

Caste in India is not only the categorization of Varna system but the entire concept of discriminatory patterns appears to be emanating from the stratified division of the ancient Indian society.

Discrimination based upon caste and Indian social construct are inseparable threads that make the warp and weft of the Indian society. Dalit literature has become an indispensable tool in the understanding of caste patterns, issues, discriminations and psychological impact on the minds of affected people. Untouchability, an inhuman practice founded on the premise of racial purity and supposed contamination by a Dalit's touch and even presence, was abolished on November 26, 1949 from the Constitution of Independent India. Yet the implementation of the Act becomes a sham in the practical alleys of people's life. To frame something within the design of Penal code and make it a written document was not as difficult as to make it a practice.

Practically Indian society is divided into two sections – All the castes on one hand and the Dalits/all scheduled tribes on the other. The subdivisions within the various castes from Brahmin to Vaishya become one entity in opposition to Dalits. They become an outsider, untouchables, lesser species in relation to the mainstream masses. The present study does not go into the historical study of caste system and its categorization rather the focus will remain on the existence of discriminatory attitude of people against Dalits. No justification can vindicate the ongoing oppression of Dalits in the name of Varna system. No explanation can fill the huge gap between the two-one includes all the castes and the other who were/are never a part of the mainstream. The present article in its focus and scope is restricted to Valmiki's autobiography Joothan-A Dalit's Life.

The journey from Untouchables to Harijan and then to 'Dalit' never brought any change in the mindset of people. The term 'Scheduled Castes' has arrived with the same connotation. Joothan is a tale of wearing identity with a sense of being someone who is not only different but inferior as well. They are always reminded of their lesser position, lower than the lowest. The saga of bitterness, torture, humiliation, oppression and hatred towards a section of humanity is documented with truth and sincerity. The bureaucratic phrase 'Other Backward Classes' clearly carries the term 'other' – which is not 'Us'. The non-inclusive approach is embedded in every title/term Dalits or other lower castes are associated with.

Social hegemony in the caste structure of India is the most difficult knot that requires change. In the name of 'Shastras' and divisions on the basis of work is an illusion. Caste is always and invariably decided by virtue of birth. Many movements

happened over a period of time which brought our attention to the unfortunate scenario of social inequality. Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj are a few to quote which tried to fill the gap in the discriminatory thought of people of India.

The biased sensibility is a product of Indian socio-economic construct of Indian society. Jyotiba Phule criticized the inequality in the name of religion; And so has Dr. Ambedkar who succeeded in exposing the shallow structure of the caste division and dismantling the very premise of it.

Gandhi's role in the inclusion of untouchables has changed the political and social scenario of the country. From the very beginning, he kept condemning the tradition of untouchability and excluding lower castes from the mainstream. He writes in Harijan, "Untouchability is the greatest blot on Hinduism...It is against the fundamental principles of humanity, it is against the dictates of reason that a man should, by mere reason of birth, be ever regarded as an untouchable, even unapproachable and unseeable" (4).

But when we read Joothan written after so many decades, the impact of Gandhi's words appears a farce. Harijan Sevak Sangh was set up to initiate constructive transformation for the social and material development of the ignored classes.

Ambedkar also spearheaded a movement against untouchability in 1927. The Poona Pact, a historical document was signed between Dr. Ambedkar and Gandhiji to reach to a middle ground with regard to reservation of seats for the Dalits in 1932.

Ambedkar considered that the basis of caste discrimination was religious but on the other hand Gandhiji thought it to be social. The reason that it still prevails in our society lies in the words of Ambedkar, "Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realize that our people have yet to learn it" (The Essential Writings 484).

Kalyani Thakur, a Dalit feminist believed that writing is an act of resistance. In an interview she said, "I write so that I can protest. Weapons are needed in protest. My pen is my weapon. I protest through my pen" (60). It can be said about every Dalit writing even when the tone of the writing is not of aggression or apparent protest. Likewise the tone of Joothan is not of aggression or self-pity but rather a linear narration of Valmiki's life pushes us to the brink of contemplation- forcing us to ruminate over the past actions of the elite class. Usha Bende remarks, "Susie Tharu opines that Dalits must reinvent their caste by 'critiquing and rearranging' the field of dominant culture and the politics of upper caste" (38).

Om Prakash Valmiki's pain and scars on his soul compelled his memory lane to go back to his childhood when accepting Joothan (leftover food) was a custom. About the narrative pattern employed by Valmiki, Bom remarks, "Instead of following a linear pattern, the author moves from memory to memory demonstrating how his present is deeply scarred by his past in spite of the distance he has traversed to become one of the prominent authors in Dalit literature" (5).

Joothan is an autobiographical document therefore no solution to the problem is suggested. The narrative, though written to express the anger towards the bias and hatred of upper caste towards Dalits, does not suggest how a society can overcome these biases. In the Introduction to Joothan- A Dalit's Life Mukherjee writes "How far removed Valmiki's subject matter is evident from the very title Joothan. It proves the truth of Dangle's claim that Dalit writing demands a new dictionary, for the words that it uses are as new as the objects, situations and activities that they describe" (xxxix).

Ambedkar belief that caste was a 'monster' is practically the experience of Omprakash Valmiki portrayed in Joothan. According to Ambedkar, "Caste was everywhere, blocking the path of Dalit advancement at every turn. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform unless you kill the monster (of caste)" (Annihilation of Caste 16). Caste was like a shadow for Valmiki as well wherever he went it followed. The narrative is an identity search by showing one who did not shed his caste and showed a mirror to the society.

Valmiki's story is a documentation of his community; it acts as a mirror to the social construct which requires change from inside out. Dalit literature is a landmark of voice of documented protest, the ongoing oppression against one section of the society. The oppression, both physical and mental, has left an indelible mark on the souls of Dalits. The propagandist approach in the style of writing Dalit literature is the outcome of voice which the entire community wants to rage against the mainstream.

Limbale considers Dalits and their writings as vital 'political and social force'. It can be viewed as constituting a considerable challenge to the theorization about and also questioning of culture, societal norms and literature per se by the intelligentsia hailing from the privileged castes or the writers belonging to foreign nations. Not taking cognizance of the

problem or failure to question the ‘hegemonic discourse’ would “exclude the realities and experiences of nearly a quarter of the country’s people” (vii-viii).

In Joothan, Valmiki presents an autobiographical account of his life recounting his village Barla where he was born in 1950. He is one of those writers who have first-hand experience of torturous discrimination done towards Dalits. The book explores his anguish, disgust, and pain of going through this experience of being a dalit in the Indian construct of division of castes. The remarkable feature of the text is that it never attacks individuals rather it is an attack on the system of caste division itself. The people who find mention committing atrocities on people of lower castes are not abused in retaliation. The misconceptions, orthodox approach and the social construct itself are exposed.

The pain and disgust are visible in the narration of Joothan right from the beginning till end. The childhood memories are torn with tortures and injustice. Not only the students but teachers and headmaster are also part of brazenly physical and humiliating remarks. The most commonly used expression to address a dalit is ‘Abey Chuhre ke’.

Ruing about the gross apathy and unjust conditions which Dalit students were compelled to put up with, Valmiki writes, “I had to sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor. The children of the Tyagis would tease me by calling me Chuhre ka” (2-3).

A sharp contrast can be observed in the narration of childhood memories is that in the mainstream literature, childhood is presented as a fairy tale dream. The huge corpus of stories that sing highly of childhood appear ironic when we read the kind of childhood memories Omprakash Valmiki and his friends and other children of the community go through.

The book is not divided into chapters or sections. It is a continuous journey of torture, oppression, pain, abuse, and embarrassment. Right from the beginning till end it is one document. The geography of the village Barla itself is emblematic of clear stratification of Indian society on the lines of caste and discrimination as an intrinsic part of it . The pond in the center of the village was a line of division amongst the upper caste Tyagis and the Dalits. Ironically water body, a symbol of life happened to be a boundary between the two- oppressor and the oppressed. Valmiki describes his surroundings, “The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fight this was the environment of my childhood” (1).

The hatred of one human being for the other is so strange that no one can explain it by any stretch of logic or reason. The believers in God are not able to comprehend that all are one. Our scriptures and science both have been failed to convince in the equality amongst people across castes. Valmiki’s account questions our ethics, the principles which form the very bedrock of humanity. He writes, “Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a chuhra , one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human” (2).

The ‘Chuhras’ were not viewed as human is not a simple statement, it is a tale of painful journey of the community. The journey which was never documented in the glorious sagas of the epics. Omprakash Valmiki raises this question about this missing narrative since ages. Epics which sang the glory of the past never included the plight of untouchables/shudras.

Valmiki wonders, “Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?” The things or narratives which were depicted as heaven in literature are hell for them. Rainy season and village life are a few to quote.

Omprakash Valmiki has succeeded in abolishing some customs from his family structure which were orthodox in approach.

After facing the ‘Salaam’ custom during the wedding ceremony of his friend he felt as if his soul has been tarnished. When a wedding was to take place in his family he successfully convinced his father that they should put a stop to that tradition of ‘Salaam’ which was no different from begging going door to door to upper caste households for some money or gifts.

It was the vision and strong will of his father that changed his life altogether, right from the beginning, from his admission into the school. At every step his father believed in him and gave him the authority to choose whatever he wanted to do in his life. His mother had also a great influence on him.

Once when she overturned the basketful of Joothan (leftover food) after she was humiliated left a positive imprint on his child mind. The seeds of rebel and registering the voice of protest have been sown in him.

Early in his life he realized that he cannot follow religion. He could not ignore the discriminations within the structure of caste and in the name of religion. The question if they are also part of the same religion then why are they considered so low and become target of hatred. He started avoiding puja; he knew that he was neither a Christian nor a Hindu. The 'Bhagats' and tantriks cheating innocent people on the pretext of curing them repelled him like anything.

Memories documented about his college life are the memories of anguish and pain. Despite the fact that he met some good teachers, who were good human beings but the list of teachers who represented the divide between 'us and them' is long. He quotes his teacher fulminating against him, "Abey brother-in-law, progeny of a chuhra, let me know when you die. You think you are a hero. Today I am going to draw oil from your tresses" (47).

The remarks are not only targeted at him, but it is the hatred of entire upper caste towards the community of Dalits. He left his college studies to join Ordnance factory Dehradun as an apprentice. His father's belief that one can escape caste was an illusion. Valmiki knew, "Caste follows one right up to ones death" (78).

Through out his life he has experienced the scorn in the attitude of people. Every word used to denote their community carries negative connotations, from Chuhra-Untouchable-Harijan to Dalit. Not even a single word made them part of the main stream, every word depicts a gap of superior and inferior. Valmiki retorts, "After reading Ambedkar, I had realized 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" (72).

His life at Ordnance factory Dehradun, Jabalpur and then at Chandrapur were active years of his life when he started reading a lot, participated in theatre, acted, directed and understood many theories which enhanced his understanding of life both theoretically and practically. His passion for theatre was realized at Chandrapur and Mumbai. He could not hold his surprise and disgust that people never change their opinion about the caste even after holding high positions and acquiring higher degrees. Kulkarni's behavior towards Dalits who would visit his house was shameful; he had kept different utensils even for his colleagues. Nothing changed their ideas on the stratification of castes. Education, modernism and their exposure to the world were unable to open their eyes that caste discrimination is shallow and requires change. It was the constant iteration of the same experience at the hands of upper caste people. In face of all adversity Valmiki demonstrates his grit by using his caste as his surname instead of being ashamed of it. He believes, "When an untouchable, a person from a caste considered low, uses his caste name as his surname, with a feeling of assertion he is being very brave" (124).

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Many people started shedding off their surnames to save themselves from the humiliation at the hands of swarnas. Even Omprakash Valmiki's wife kept on insisting that he should remove his surname. She felt that their surname has been the cause of neglect and humiliation. Valmiki's many friends also suggested the same. Some people thought that he should not be very specific about writing about Dalits. They thought he should rather start writing on universal themes.

Subconsciously it was their wish to spare themselves from the critique of being portrayed as oppressors. Valmiki very courageously continued with his surname and never hid his identity. He shares, "Today caste remains a pre-eminent factor in social life. As long as people don't know you are a Dalit, things are fine. The moment they find out your caste, everything changes. The whispers slash your veins like knives. Poverty, illiteracy, broken lives, the pain of standing outside the door, how would the civilized Savarna Hindus know it" (134).

Owing to the stigma attached to the low caste, many Dalits have started hiding their identity to save themselves from the shame of public discrimination. Valmiki's own niece did so when she was once asked if she is related to Valmiki. When Dalit writers openly talk about their caste like Valmiki did in his autobiography it becomes a point of change. A discourse is initiated which helps people to change their mindset. Laws are made to stop oppression but the psychological framework of mind that carries the biases of ages becomes more difficult to change.

Valmiki questioned the process of modernism, scientific discoveries and so called modern progress that has not changed the minds of people when it comes to the question of caste. Dalit literature is a documented protest of oppressed and tormented. The book is a reply to the tradition of Joothan which they have been taking from the upper castes in lieu of wages and hard

work they do for them. It was a kind of mandatory tradition in his village which they cannot afford to overlook or defy. That was the symbol of their superiority and Dalits' inferiority. Gandhiji and Ambedkar's appeal not to accept Joothan imparted a sense of awakening against the act of accepting Joothan.

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