

Reality of Dalit Life in *Joothan*

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Abstract: Literature is the mirror of life. A writer writes whatever he sees and experiences in the world. It is also true in the case of Dalit autobiographies. Omprakash Valmiki published his autobiography *Joothan* in 1997. He became the important subject matter of discussion in the realm of Indian literature with this book. It happened because he presented the real picture of his untouchable life in his autobiography. He wrote how he was ill treated by the people of upper stratum. He wrote his childhood experiences in his native village and the local school where he was again and again told that he was an untouchable and his social status is lower than the caste people of the village. The present research paper will include a discussion of the problematic life of the untouchables in *Joothan*. Although untouchability was abolished in 1949, Dalits continued to face discrimination, economic deprivation, violence, and ridicule. Valmiki shares his heroic struggle to survive a preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution and his transformation into a speaking subject under the influence of the great Dalit political leader, B. R. Ambedkar. A document of the long-silenced and long-denied sufferings of the Dalits, *Joothan* is a major contribution to the archives of Dalit history and a manifesto for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness.

Keywords: Untouchable, Dalit, *Joothan*, Society, Caste and Outcaste etc.

The Research Paper: Arun Prabha Mukherjee explains that the Hindi word *joothan* literally means food left on an eater's plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle class, urban home. However, such food would only be characterized *joothan* if someone else besides the original eater were to eat it. The word carries the connotations of ritual purity and pollution as *jootha* means polluted. Words like leftovers and leavings don't substitute well, scraps and slops work better, though they are associated more with pigs than with humans. *Joothan* is also unfit for consumption by anyone in the eater's family or in his own community. Mukherjee writes:

The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community, which not only had to rely on *joothan* but also relished it.

Valmiki gives a detailed description of collecting, preserving and eating joothan. His memories of being assigned to guard the drying joothan from crows and chickens, and of his relishing the dried and reprocessed joothan burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present.

The word actually carries a lot of historical baggage. . . .Ambedkar . . . advised untouchables to stop accepting joothan. Ambedkar, an indefatigable documenter of atrocities against Dalits [and an 'untouchable' himself], 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 (II).

Joothan, the autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki, is the real mirror of Dalit life in the grip of cruel hands of caste system of Hinduism. It is the story of an untouchable in particular and of all the scavengers in general. The incidents narrated in *Joothan* are no doubt from the personal life of Valmiki but they have been happening in the lives of many Dalits from the time immemorial. The customs of Dalit community are not only from the life of the author rather they are the part and parcel of the whole scavenger community. The victim of these customs is not the author only but every scavenger comes across the same train in life. The caste discrimination faced by him no doubt is his personal but that becomes general because what ever faced by the author, has been faced by every scavenger with a slight difference. Thus *Joothan* is the true picture of Dalit life which presents the real dirty face of caste system of Hinduism. Omprakash Valmiki describes his life as an untouchable, or Dalit, in the newly independent India of the 1950s. Joothan refers to scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or animals. India's untouchables have been forced to accept and eat joothan for centuries, and the word encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced to live at the bottom of India's social pyramid.

The author narrates some reminiscences from his childhood. At school, he faced discrimination many times. The experience at the school leaves a lasting impression on the young Valmiki. He specially narrates the humiliating experience by Headmaster Kaliram who seems to be a rabid casteist. He orders the frail boy Omprakash to sweep the school compound day after day. The author narrates that incident as:

Frightened, I picked up the three-day-old broom [now only a cluster of] thin sticks. Tears were falling from my eyes. I started to sweep the compound while my tears fell. From the doors and windows of the schoolrooms, the eyes of the teachers and the boys saw this spectacle. Each pore of my body was submerged in an abyss of anguish (15-16).

The untouchable boys were openly abused in the classroom by the teacher and often beaten up as well. Valmiki takes the opportunity to highlight the fact that the Brahmin teacher in the school used to swear words on a regular basis. He has tried to point out that when swear words are used in real life by people who are supposed to know Brahma (Brahmins) then it is legitimate to portray that reality in creative writing as a true depiction of lived experience.

For instance the image of the guru (teacher) that Valmiki would remember throughout his life is that of a man who would swear about his mother and sister and who would sexually abuse young boys. Valmiki writes:

. . . I went to the class and sat down quietly. After a few minutes the headmaster's loud thundering was heard: 'Abey Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding ... your mother ...' I had begun to shake uncontrollably. A Tyagi boy shouted, 'Master Saheb, there he is, sitting in the corner.'

The headmaster had 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 school' (15).

The experience at the school, described in the passages above, highlight the cruelty and heartlessness of the teachers and fellow students. It got worse with the new Headmaster Kaliram. Valmiki swept the school compound for three days. He suffered this indignity for three days. On the fourth day his father discovered him with a broom in his hand sweeping the school compound. In one decisive gesture his father, instead of quietly suffering the indignity, confronts the Headmaster. The courage and fortitude shown by his father is indeed remarkable. Expectedly Valmiki was thrown out of the school.

But his father was not going to give up easily. He promised the Headmaster that Valmiki would indeed study in the same school and that he will ensure that more untouchables would follow Valmiki to the school.

It is very surprising that Valmiki's father never let him leave the path of education. He always encouraged him to be educated and to help his brotherhood. The son fulfilled the desire of his father and got education in contrary circumstances. Valmiki's father confronted the Brahman teacher and encouraged him to be educated. By chance his father comes that way to the school. He sees all the spectacles in the broad day light. He becomes furious with rage and shouts to the headmaster Kaliram. He snatches the broom and with eyes blazing, began to screams, 'Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?' (16). The headmaster calls his father names and roars back, 'Take him away from here ... The Chuhra wants him educated ... Go, go ... Otherwise I will have your bones broken (16). Witness the following lines:

On his way out, his father declared in a loud voice, 'I am leaving now ... but this Chuhre ka will study right here ... In this school. And not just him, but there will be more coming after him.' His father's courage and fortitude left a deep and decisive mark on the boy's personality. His father knocked on the doors of other upper-caste men he had worked for, hoping they would support him against the headmaster, but the response was the opposite. He was plainly told: 'What is the point of sending him to school?' 'When has a crow become a swan?' 'Hey, if he asked a Chuhra's progeny to sweep, what is the big deal in that?' When his father had all but given up, one village elder yielded to his tearful beseeching and intervened to get the boy reinstated. A close call, else he would have ended up illiterate like the rest of his family (16-17).

Though he consistently did well in his studies, his memories of school are suffused with pain and humiliation, from taunts and beatings by schoolmates and teachers in a terror-filled environment. He was excluded from extracurricular activities like school plays. He was not allowed to drink water from a glass when thirsty. He had to cup his hands, and the peon would pour water from way high up, lest his hands touch the glass.

Omparkash Valmiki himself writes at the end of *Joothan* that:

Times have changed. But there is something somewhere that continues to irk. I have asked many scholars to tell me why Savarnas [caste Hindus] hate Dalits and Shudras so much? The Hindus who worship trees and plants, beasts and birds, why are they so intolerant of Dalits? 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. 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?

Why is my caste my only identity? Many friends hint at the loudness and arrogance of my writings. They insinuate that I have imprisoned myself in a narrow circle. They say that literary expression should be focused on the universal; a writer ought not to limit himself to a narrow, confined terrain of life. That is, my being Dalit and arriving at a point of view according to my environment and my socioeconomic situation is being arrogant. Because in their eyes, I am only an SC, the one who stands outside the door (160).

He does remember fondly a couple of boys who befriended him and didn't let caste come between them. Sukkhan Singh, Ram Singh, Shrawan Kumar Sharma and Chandarpal Varma. This friendship caused problem several times but reality is reality which cannot be denied with petty feelings of casteism. The friends of school remained his friends forever. Humanity is greater than casteism. It may overcome every ism which is harmful for humanism.

Conclusion: *Joothan* is a self conscious Dalit literary text, makes a powerful statement against the oppressive caste system still prevalent in most parts of India. Valmiki's use of autobiography helps him to occupy a vantage subject position from which he presents a Dalit's lived experience. The 'true to life' format of the autobiography helps him to lay bare the brutality inherent in the caste system, which consequently becomes a powerful argument in favour of dismantling this undesirable form of social organization. At the same time, Valmiki's own struggles and success, acts as motivation for

others to struggle and achieve their goals. *Joothan* symbolizes the struggle for dignity and human rights and demonstrates that a revolutionary transformation of society is not just desirable but possible as well. Indian literatures have either ignored untouchables or portrayed them as victims in need of saviors, as objects without voice or agency. Valmiki has broken new ground with an authentic recording of these unrepresented experiences. He tells the stories of life in the untouchable caste of Chuhra, at the bottom rung of society; his heroic struggle to survive this preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution; the cruel obstacles he overcame to become the first high school graduate of his neighborhood; his coming to consciousness under the influence of the great Dalit political leader B. R. Ambedkar; and his transformation into a speaking subject bearing witness to the oppression and exploitation that he endured as an individual and as a member of a stigmatized and oppressed community.

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