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## A Concrete Introspection of Social Injustice in Omprakash Valmiki's *Jhoothan: A Dalit Life*

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### **Abstract:**

After the independence and implementation of our own constitution, which has several provisions for the removal of many inhuman social practices, the reality is still very different. Those who were respected are still respected and rest is deprived of their identity and basic needs. In this regard 'The Dalits' come first who have been suppressed for ages. Indian society had never regarded them as a prominent part of their culture. They have been treated even worse than animals. Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiographical text '*Jhoothan: A Dalit Life*' have taken these issues as a serious subject to make people aware of the ill-treatment of the upper class society system.

The present study explores the atrocities and injustice of the higher caste over lower caste, the untouchables, prevailing in the 1950s India. The paper presents the sufferings of the writer and his struggle to get his recognition as a human being. The paper will further analyze the injustice in the life of a 'Dalit' in an Indian society, a society which is full of orthodox traditions and several unjust practices. In the life of a dalit, education, job and such economic upliftment, all are of no use; as he is a 'Dalit' first who has to experience inequality and injustice at each and every stage of life.

### **Keywords: Jhoothan, Dalit, Injustice, Untouchable, Inequality, Constitution**

The discussion on the social justice and injustice is one of the most important issues in cotemporary global scenario. New Oxford American Dictionary defines Social Justice as "justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society"<sup>2</sup> (Wikipedia). Contrary to it where inequalities persist in the society it falls within the sweep of injustice. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines injustice as "unfair treatment: a situation in which the rights of a person or group of people are ignored"<sup>3</sup> (Meriam- Webster). Thus it can be said that the concept of social justice takes the objectives of removing inequalities and affording equal opportunities to all citizens in social, economic and political spheres and social injustice has significance in the context of Indian society which is divided into Castes and Communities and they create walls and barriers of exclusiveness on the basis of superiority and inferiority.

After independence it was Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, who excelled as a polemical leader of the Dalits against social injustice and tried to achieve social justice in terms of one man – one value in modern India. According to him the term 'social justice' is based on equality, liberty and fraternity of all human beings. The aim of social justice is to remove all kinds of inequalities based upon Caste, race, sex, power, position and wealth. B. R. Purohit and Sandeep Joshi Writes:

The contents of Ambedkar's concept of social justice included unity and equality of all human beings, equal worth of men and women, respect for the weak and the lowly, regard for human rights, benevolence, mutual love, sympathy, tolerance and charity towards fellow being. Humane treatment in all cases dignity of all citizens, abolition of Caste distinctions, education and property for all and good will and gentleness, He emphasized more on fraternity and emotional integration. His view on social justice was to remove man-made inequalities of all shades through law, morality and public conscience; he stood for justice for a sustainable society.<sup>4</sup> (189)

However, the 'Dalit Movement' started taking place during 1970s with the advent of Dalit Panther by Namdeo Dhasal. Parallel to this movement, a new literary movement burst on the Indian Literature, especially in Marathi language, named Dalit Literature (literature of untouchables). It is a creative intellectual literary expression which transforms the social realities in various literary genres. It is primarily social and human document, which deals with the people who had been socially and economically exploited in India for hundreds of years.

Omprakash Valmiki, a prolific figure of Hindi Dalit writings is a precursor among the writers who laid down the foundation of Dalit Literature. He has touched different genres of literature with his creative writings including poetry, short stories, play and autobiography. His critical work *Aesthetic of Dalit Literature (Dalit Sahitya Ka Soundryashastra, 2001)* is considered as a mile stone among Dalit writers. His Autobiography *Jhoothan: A Dalit Life (1997)* is a document of social injustice and cultural discriminations besides being an autobiography of the community to which he belongs. '*Jhoothan: A Dalit Life*' is an autobiographical account of Valmiki's journey from his birth and upbringing as an untouchable in the newly independent Indian society of the fifties to his present life as a Dalit. The title '*Jhoothan*' is a Hindi word which comes from the word 'jhootha' means scrap food or food left after eating. There was a tradition not so long ago and is still prevalent in the society in many remote villages, where the dalits were supposed to collect the food left on the plates (Pattles: plates of leaves, a custom where food was served in parties during feasts). The title of the autobiography gains significance as it points out to the untold humiliation suffered by the dalits who had to survive on the leftovers of the upper castes.

The aim of the present paper is to analyze the social injustice done against dalits on the three grounds: education, economic disparity and the most important social exclusion. *Jhoothan: A Dalit Life* is about the history of the entire 'churha' community, which has suffered humiliation inflicted upon them due to caste based discrimination and social injustice for ages. Valmiki describes how an entire community totally depends on the scrap food of the upper caste 'Taga' in return for their hard work. It shows that how tradition of collecting scrap food of higher caste by the untouchables (lower castes) plays an important role to maintain the dominance and power of the higher caste over the lower castes on both social and psychological level. Raj Kumar writes in his book *Dalit personal Narratives*:

They (chuhra caste, 'untouchables') had to depend entirely on the mercy of the upper castes who instead of giving them their dues exploited them. Their situation today may not exactly be the same but they have not benefitted very much in an independent India. That is precisely the reason why Valmiki has deliberately chosen such a title for his autobiography reminding the reader of the continuing humiliation<sup>5</sup>. (197)

The very first paragraph of the '*Jhoothan*' brings in to the focus about the injustice done towards the dalits by keeping them outside the geographical boundary, so as to maintain the hegemony over the dalits and to make them realize their position in the society. Valmiki writes: "Right in front of Chandrbhan Taga's gher was a little johri, a pond, which had created a sort of partition between the Chuhra's dwellings and the village". (*Jhoothan*, 1) Throughout the text Valmiki described the social injustice of the Dalits as untouchables. The dalits are subjected to inhuman treatment of untouchability right from their birth. They just mean till the work, the work which is menial and of a labour. The work done by the Dalits is often unpaid, without any kind of wages and they have no right to demand the wages for the same. Instead, they get sworn at and abused. The principles, in which the Indian caste system is made, have created a society which is excluded from the main stream of the society as they are untouchables and it is so deeply rooted that they are often seen worse than the animals or dogs. In *Jhoothan* Valmiki writes: "untouchability is so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted" (2)

Next, in his autobiography Valmiki discusses the problems and struggles of a dalit for an education even after the provisions for the betterment of the Dalits in the Indian Constitution which were made and framed by Dr. Ambedkar. Right from the early stages of his life, the writer was conscious of the importance of studies. Getting educated was a difficult task for the dalits. They were humiliated if they did so. Valmiki suffered a lot during his entire education period particularly by his teachers. *Jhoothan* is nothing but his struggle to get educated. Often he was taunted at and reminded of his caste and profession by claiming that the education is not for the 'Dalits' or 'Chuhra'. Valmiki discloses the various forms of humiliation and insult inflicted upon him by his teacher, Kaliram because he belonged to the higher caste. Valmiki writes that he was referred as 'chuhra' and often asked to prepare a broom and sweep the school "Chuhre ka' break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation" (6). When Valmiki's father took up this matter to higher officials of the village they supported Kaliram. Valmiki writes:

"Whosoever door we knocked, the answer was,  
 'What is the point of sending him to school?  
 'When a crow become a swan?'  
 'You illiterate boorish people, what do you know?  
 Knowledge is not gained like this.'  
 'he only got him to sweep; did not ask for his thumb in the  
 gurudakshina like Dronacharya.'  
 And so forth" (6)

This was because most of the students and the majority of the teachers belonged to the Tyagi community. The writer talks about the discrimination he had to face in the school at different points in his autobiography. He says:

"During the examinations we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass". (16)

Right from his childhood, the writer wished to go to school in neat ironed clothes. But the dhobi refused to wash clothes for a low caste Chuhra boy. Thus the writer realized that one can somehow get rid of poverty and deprivation but it is not possible to get past the stigma of caste. While talking about his memories in school, the writer talks about a number of teachers who encouraged him and also about the ones who ill treated him. Valmiki repeatedly narrates his experiences of pain and exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. He writes:

I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On one such occasion, I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role, but I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendents of the Gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door. (16)

When he reached the tenth standard, he was determined to study well in order to get good marks which would fetch him an opportunity to study in a college. But on the eve of his mathematics examination he was forced to work. He spent one whole day sowing cane under the instructions of a Tyagi. He felt humiliated and tortured. Valmiki writes; “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)

Valmiki in his autobiography shows how a well educated person also follows the caste sanctions. The incident of April 1965 when his Mathematics teacher Narendra Tyaagi felt thirsty and asked Valmiki to bring a glass of water from the pitcher, but as he came to know about the caste of Valmiki he refused to have water from a ‘chuhra’ boy to quench his thirst. In spite of being aware of the thought of equality and social justice he could not pick up enough courage to disregard the caste discrimination. Valmiki writes:

I said to him, ‘Master Saheb, I am not permitted even to touch those pitchers. Please send someone else.’  
Master Saheb was surprised. He asked ‘Why?’  
I replied quietly, ‘I belong to the Chuhra caste.’  
He came out of his trance, ‘No... sit down.’ And he went on his own to get water.  
I felt that even though this man has a master’s degree in mathematics, he is a coward. He didn’t have courage to drink water from my hand. (64-65)

Next, major instance of social injustice that presents the traumatic condition of the Dalits in the society is economic disparity. Valmiki in his autobiography draws our attention towards economic disparity and poverty. The Dalits own no property, no land thus they have to work for the higher caste people that too without pay as a bounded labourer. The caste system set the tradition of serving higher caste by the lower caste including all kinds of menial works. Self respect is a mere dream for the Dalits particularly for the untouchables. In return of the services of the Dalits, higher caste people abuse them. Valmiki writes:

We did all sorts of work for the Tagas, including agriculture work and general labour. We would often have

to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead, we got sworn at and abused. They did not call us by our names. If a person were older, then he would be called 'Oe Chuhre'. If the person were younger or of the same age, then 'Abey Chuhre' was used. (2)

Because of poverty the dalits could not raise their voice against the injustice of work without wage. Their protest died when they confronted with hunger. Dalits have to pass their livelihood on the mercy of higher caste people and compelled to relish the scrap food or 'jhoothan' food left on the plates after eating. This tradition of collecting scrap food could not let Dalits to overcome from the cycle of poverty and the curse of being in the lowest caste. It also creates a psychological acceptance of subjugation for the Dalits. Valmiki writes;

...when the guests and the baratis, the bridegroom's party, were eating their meals, the Chuhras would sit outside with huge baskets. After the baraties had eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in the Chuhra's baskets, which they took home, to save the joothan sticking to them. The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweetmeats, and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make them happy. The joothan was eaten with a lot of relish. (9)

The last most important issue of social injustice dealt by Valmiki is social exclusion. The Dalits also suffered injustice due to the social exclusion on the basis of caste. In spite of being in the society they were not considered as a part of society by the higher caste. Dalits were never accepted to be equal to the higher caste people in terms of education, eating habits even though the Dalits got job in government sectors. Autobiography of Valmiki marked an instance of treatment of Mrs. Kulkarni for Prof. Kambley and offering him tea in a different cup. Valmiky writes:

While drinking my tea I noticed Kamble's cup. It was different from the cups offered to the rest of us... on our way back, I asked Sudama patil he said, 'Maharashtrian Brahmins, that too from poona, they don't allow Mahars to touch their dishes.' (95)

The social injustice faced by Valmiki is because of social and religious sanctions. The ill practices in the Hindu religion and the wrong notions of the followers of the religion against Dalits, left a deep scar on the writer's heart/ emotions and the same is/ his hatred for these discriminating behavior is presented as:

'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's autobiography brings out the main cause for injustice towards Dalits as the caste system prevailing in Indian society. It is the Caste which decides the destiny of any newly born child. One is compelled to follow the social traditions, rules and regulations of the society, if he/she wants to survive within the society and bound to follow the ancestral occupation. In case of untouchables the cultural practices led them to suffer injustice for their whole span of life. Valmiki writes:

'Caste' is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, 'caste' determines his or her destiny. 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 great cultural heritage, did they decide 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. (133-134)

Valmiki's autobiographical text *Jhoothan* not directly proposes any solution for removing injustice towards the Dalits, but it can be traced out that education is the only powerful means to fight against the injustice and inequality. Education can bring out the consciousness among the Dalits for their rights. For Dr. Ambedkar too, education is only the way to liberate Dalits from the traditional slavery. By education Dr. Ambedkar emphasized on creating social, economical, and political awareness among the depressed class as they will not be able to defend their rights due to lack of awareness.

Towards conclusion it is made clear that Valmiki like many other dalit writers of Dalit Literature demands for social equality and human dignity for the untouchables in the society. Empowerment through education would ensure human dignity and give identities which are the prime focus of his autobiography. It also suggests that after getting education and settling down in life, they can raise voice against injustice based on caste to regain their human identity (as an important part of society). The struggle is not for creating violence or anarchy but it is the struggle for their being acceptance as a human being with human dignity in democratic India.

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