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## Rise of an Untouchable in Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*

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### **Abstract:**

Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's life* (1997) is landmark in Dalit literature. Although, Dalit literature is yet to be accepted as the main stream literature, yet it raised certain questions which must be answered. *Joothan: A Dalit's life* has autobiographical elements of Valmiki's early life and depicts the pain and humiliation of an untouchable in the newly independent India of the fifties.

This paper attempts to portray the rise of the protagonist against all odd circumstances and adversities. It shows that how a Dalit resists and fights back to the system of oppression and exploitation. It also raises the question on the caste discrimination and advocates the rights of marginalized Dalits.

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, Indian Caste System, Dalit Politics and Autobiography.

Dalit literature represents an influential, rising trend in the Indian literary scene. Dalit writing is a post-independence literary phenomenon. The emergence of Dalit literature has a great historical significance. It has served the purpose of awakening the consciousness of the downtrodden for forging their identities. The recent surge in Dalit literature in India is an attempt to bring to the forefront the experiences of discrimination, violence and poverty of the Dalits. 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.

Dalit autobiographies are meant to be understood as a representative story, where the 'ordinary' or 'representative' Dalit individual uses his narrative to raise his voice for those who are silenced by caste oppression. Yet, although Dalit autobiographies certainly invoke multiple subjectivities where the individual 'I' is linked to the communal 'We', the relationship between the two is neither direct nor unproblematic.

Living an untouchable life in Indian caste society is a tremendous unfortunate affair as the untouchables are thrown not only to the lowest rung of the social ladder but also they are compelled to swallow inhuman tortures. The untouchables had to suffer because of the lack of proper food and nourishment. They had to tolerate a lot. They got ill-treatment from the upper castes people. They had subdued their voice. The people who were poor and lived in the slums and had no means to earn livelihood for their children were forced 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. Om Prakash 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*

This paper intends to depict that how a Dalit writer has used the tool of autobiography to show the harsh realities of caste system. It also demonstrates the sufferings and humiliations of an untouchable in the India that how he was deprived of even basic human rights. Valmiki did not succumb to it, he chose to fight back. As 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.*

It is indeed shameful that despite more than 60 years of independence India has not been able to erase the curse of untouchability from our society. There are scores of laws against untouchability but in practice they have never been implemented honestly. Dalits have remained excluded not only from the economic and cultural mainstream of society but also from the ambit of the expression of their existential notions in the hierarchical order of the society.

Valmiki shows the picture of caste discrimination in *Joothan*. He says:

*'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'.*

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, an autobiographical account of his birth and upbringing as an untouchable, or Dalit, in the newly independent India of the 1950s, is one of the first portrayals of Dalit life in India from an insider's perspective. The title of the book, '*Joothan*' encapsulates the pain, humiliation and oppression suffered by the Dalit community as a whole, which has been relegated to the bottom of India's social pyramid for years. Valmiki starts out his life story by insisting that:

*Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creation. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and compassionless towards Dalits.*

He further 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. It is related to the word 'Jootha', which means defiled and such scraps, are characterized as 'Joothan' only if someone else eats them. The term joothan, actually has a historical aspect. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi advised untouchable to stop accepting Joothan. India's untouchables have been forced to accept and eat Joothan for their subsistence for centuries. The untouchables or Dalits who were social outcasts 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 to animals. Although untouchability was legally abolished in the constitution of the newly independent India in 1950, Dalits still continue to face discrimination, economic deprivation, violence, and ridicule.

*Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki is one such work of Dalit literature, first published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, a professor of English at York University in Canada and did a great job by making the work available to a wider audience.

Usually Dalits are excluded from the field of education because of the hegemonic class impression that they are destined to do menial jobs. Valmiki recalls the grievous episodes of his school days and unfolds it in his autobiography. In school he was prohibited from sitting along with his upper class companions. He was forced to sit on the dirty ground aloof from the upper class lads. In another episode, he talks of being dragged out of his studies by a high caste landlord to do unpaid labour. 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. He was also excluded from extra-curricular in the academy. He writes:

*I was kept out of extra-curricular activities. On such occasions 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.*

He gives account of another episode where a story is being narrated by a teacher in the book *Joothan*. He is narrating a story of Guru Drona's poverty where his son *Ashvathama* got the flour dissolved in the water, in place of milk. The story has been taken from epic *Mahabharata* written by *Ved Vyasa*. Valmiki got curious and asked his 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 write a word on our lives?*

Master saheb became infuriated when he listened the question. 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.*

His individuality is often stifled by the upper class society around him and he is often seen as only a faceless member of the society. To them he is nothing more than a 'Dalit', Chuhra', or 'Bhangi.' But Valmiki aspires that education is the only window through which he can escape from the mire of untouchability and caste hate and his personal success in education is viewed as a success of the entire "Chuhra" community to which he belongs. The powerful tool of education gave him the courage to refuse to crawl backwards with a broom as his ancestors have had to do literally in the past.

But in spite of the many successes, he realized that education could erase the boundaries fixed by caste 'only to an extent.' His academic skills and technical expertise often failed to grant him immunity from victimization in a society. He asserts:

*"As long as people don't know that you are a Dalit, things are fine. The moment they find out your caste, everything changes."*

This pain and distress can be perceived in the writings of Valmiki, who has shown subjugated and suppressed life of a Dalit. He struggled throughout his life. He says:

*"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 plight 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 an undertone of caste and religion. Valmiki writes that despite government undertakings 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 a lower 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.

In Joothan, the protagonist Valmiki is an individual and yet his individuality is often stifled those who see him only as a faceless member of his community to them he is nothing more than a

'Dalit', 'Chuhra', 'Bhangi'. In other words, the protagonist continually faces a clash between the negative identity imposed on him from the outside (usually by the upper castes) and his own positive self-ascribed identity. The protagonist's own subjective autonomy is bound up in a close relationship with his caste community. He faces personal discrimination and is also deeply sensitive to the pain of other oppressed Dalits, with whom he identifies to such a great extent that he seems to experience their pain himself. Furthermore, Valmiki's personal success in education is interpreted as a success for the entire Dalit community. The paradox is that his own progress as an individual-options that are open to him and obstacles that come in his way-is largely affected by the progress of the Dalit movement as a whole.

Instead of following a linear pattern, Valmiki 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. Despite the barriers of caste which proved to be a hindrance at every step throughout his years in school and college, Valmiki preserved to get better education and evolved. Both his parents have been portrayed as heroic figures in the text. They desired something better for their child and fought for his safety and growth. One of the most powerful moments in the text is when his mother overturned a bucketful of Joothan at a wedding after a high-caste Tyagi humiliated her. His father, Chotan Lal, always stood by Valmiki and told him that he should always do what he desired. This upcoming for members of a community that had been socially and economically oppressed for centuries is a symbol of great courage and determination. It is quite apt that Om prakash Valmiki had dedicated this text to people belonging to his community or caste. While describing the events in Bombay much later in his life, Valmiki highlights the fact that education is not the solution to the ills of the caste system.

Valmiki recalls another incident when he met a girl named Savita . One day, she invited him at her home for a cup of tea. He asked to Savita when he saw scheduled caste candidate who was given a cup of tea in another pot. He asked her:

*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.’*

Valmiki's autobiography Joothan succeeds in giving a voice to groups that were heretofore silenced and suppressed. Valmiki is among the very few grandmasters of contemporary Dalit writing, without whom the very term "Dalit Literature" would mean less than it does. In his autobiographical work Joothan, Valmiki highlights the society's practice of oppressing the so-called "untouchables" to the lowest level of society merely because they belong to the 'lesser caste.' Despite the fact that the Dalits have made productive and constructive contributions in

the creation and development of India, they are visibly neglected. Thus their history and experiences have become largely 'historical.' Even though the political power structures proclaim the abolishment.

By writing about his own experiences as a Dalit, Omprakash Valmiki reveals two objectives in his autobiography *Joothan*. His main objective is to contest the basis of caste discrimination. The other objective of Valmiki's *Joothan* is to constitute a challenge to the institutional narrative that caste no longer functions as a significant force in the public sphere of modern India, in other words, that untouchability was abolished by the constitution of India in 1950, and consequently, there is no longer caste based discrimination in the country. Valmiki constitutes a challenge to this institutional narrative by presenting what he claims are factual experiences of untouchability from the writers. As Zelliott also asserts:

*To me, Dalit is not the caste .He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, holy books teaching separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave .He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.*

### **Conclusion:**

Valmiki concludes his autobiography by pointing out the fact that caste still remains an indispensable part of their lives. It is a matter of privilege for the upper classes while it is a stigma attached to the Dalits and the other low caste people. It involves a lot of courage and strength to shake off the age old fetters imposed on these innocent beings. In his own words, Valmiki talks about the demoralizing caste system:

*'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.*

*Joothan* is significant in the sense that it is a reminder for the government to act efficiently to uplift the suppressed Dalit community. The provisions and measures provided by the government seem inadequate. The atrocities and exploitation experienced by Dalit community are unsolved even in this era of liberalisation and globalisation. In *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, Valmiki questions the relevance of caste system and exposes it as a sword pointing towards the untouchables. By giving the title, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, for his autobiography, Valmiki proclaims his intention to represent the life of untouchable through his life story. The term '*Joothan*' symbolizes the hardships suffered by the low caste people of India for centuries of alienation and isolation.

*Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, as an autobiography exhibits all the features and qualities of a true life story. But the relevance of this work is beyond the boundary of an autobiography since it stands as a symbol for the untouchable or Dalit community. As a result it could be placed on the high pedestal of Indian literature. Valmiki's struggle described so graphically is symptomatic of the extent of the challenges involved in the process of reclaiming dignity for himself and his community. Om Prakash Valmiki, through this work presents himself not as a writer, but as a

member of Dalit community who makes the unheard voice of these suppressed people echo in this world of literature.

Valmiki's *Joothan* demonstrates sufferings and humiliations of an untouchable in the India, but the protagonist did not succumb to it, he chose to fight back. It depicts the steadfast determination of an untouchable. He could have changed the names of people and places by whom he was ill-treated but in order to keep the authenticity of his bitter experiences alive, he used the real names of persons and places. It portrays the rise of the protagonist against all odd circumstances and adversities. It shows that how a Dalit resists and fights back to the system of oppression and exploitation. It also raises the question on the caste discrimination and advocates the rights of marginalized Dalits of India.

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