

## The Autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki: A Dalit Writer's Quest for Identity in an Indecent Society

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### Abstract

The hall-mark of a Dalit autobiography is its claim of expressing the authenticities of lived experiences in raw details. Naturally, memories of pain and indignities suffered by the authors and their communities form the thematic bed-rock of the memoirs written by Dalit writers. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, the autobiography of the Hindi Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki is one of the finest works belonging to this experiential field of literary expressions. Here the dominant memories are related with, as the title suggests, the dalits' caste-and poverty-generated compulsion to eat and 'relish' the food leftovers (*joothan*) of the rich and so-called upper caste people of the caste-ridden Indian society. Around this imposed inhuman eating custom Valmiki weaves his true life-story which bares the indecency of the many facets of the casteist and feudal Indian life.

**KEYWORDS:** Dalit, autobiography, caste, pain, memories, exploitation, revolt, indecent

Originally written and published in Hindi with the title *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography came out in 1997. It is one of the first texts in that language identifying itself as part of dalit literature. The book, as we see it in its present form, did not come as a complete autobiography all at once. Its seed was the first few pages the author wrote for the Hindi anthology *Harijan se Dalit* (Harijan to Dalit) in the *Aajke Prashn* (The Questions Confronting Today) series. In that publication the first pages were *Ek Dalit ki Atmakatha* (A Dalit's Autobiography). As soon as it came into the readers' hands, a series of requests arrived for Valmiki, all with one earnest insistence --- please write about your experiences in greater detail. At first, he procrastinated because to write again and that too in greater details meant reliving 'all those miseries, torments, neglects ...' which he had undergone during his growth as a child born into the socially 'despised' caste of Chuhra and during his struggles and travails on the road to adulthood and self-conscious revolutionary manhood. Besides the pain of re-living those indignities, another impediment in the work of writing a detailed autobiography was the dislike for such work expressed by those fellow caste men and dalit intellectuals who considered writing the accounts of caste indignities as self-demeaning and fruitless.

The present article has in its focus the English translation by Arun Prabha Mukherjee which was published in 2003 with the title *Joothan : A Dalit's Life*. In the translation, the translator has retained the original Hindi title, *Joothan*, while adding the phrase *A Dalit's Life* to make the translated work more expressive for the English readers. To have an idea of the power of this title to convey of the author and his community, the translator's explanation is quotable at some length :

The Hindi word *joothan* literally means food left on eater's plate, usually destined for

the garbage pail in a middle class, urbanhome. 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. I feel that English equivalents such as ‘leftovers’ or ‘leavings’ cannot substitute for *joothan*. While ‘leftovers’ has no negative connotation and can simply mean food remaining in the pot that can be eaten at the next meal, ‘leavings’, although widely used by Ambedkar and Gandhi, is no longer in the active vocabulary of Indian English. The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki’s community which not only had to rely on *joothan* but also relished it (Mukherjee xxxi).

### **The past burns the present**

Conventionally, autobiographies are books of memories, most of them soothing, some of them bitter. What make the autobiography of a dalit writer like Omprakash Valmiki radically different from the general stream of biographies is the fact that it is a book of memories which burn him ‘with renewed pain and humiliation in the present’. In the series of memories recorded in this autobiographies, the sharpest are those related with *joothan*. Here we come across a detailed description of the practice of collecting, preserving and eating *joothan*, through which the dehumanizing and barbaric face of the society and its customs are revealed with full satanic glow. The memories of Valmiki regarding the practice of *joothan* collecting and eating it form the centre of the entire autobiography. This centrality lies in the fact that it is through those very memories that this text comes to us as a significant voice in the corpus of dalit literature.

### **An indecent and uncivilized society**

Avishai Margalit, in his book *The Decent Society*, defines a decent society as one in which institutions do not humiliate people, and a civilized society as one in which people do not humiliate one another. This fine distinction may not be of much value as far as the experiences of hierarchy in the Indian society are concerned, but the experience of reading Valmiki’s autobiography gets richer when one keeps the perceptive elucidation of Margalit in mind. Here is the real life story of a person whose honour has been robbed by the institutions of his society, whose need for self-respect has been rejected both by the institutions as well as by the individuals, and who has been repeatedly forced to feel that he does not belong to the human commonwealth. The feeling writ large in the memories recorded here is conveyed in the unambiguous sentence, ‘... I feel I have grown up in a cruel and barbaric civilization’ (Valmiki 48). At the root of this feeling are the humiliations and indignities which he suffered at the hands of the social institutions which he attended with the hope of betterment as a human being. For him the school was a place with ‘terror-filled environment’. His teachers heaped piles of indignities on him by calling him ‘*abeyChuhreka*’ (you, the son of a Chuhra). He was beaten ruthlessly almost daily for no fault of his. He was ordered to sweep and ‘clean all the rooms and the verandas’. The author recalls vividly, ‘The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. Headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get drinking water’ (5). This is just one of the hideous faces of the institution of school that we see in this autobiography. What is more, he is humiliated by both teachers and the students. He writes, ‘All sorts of stratagems were tried so that I would run away from the school and take up the kind of work for which I was born. According

to these perpetrators, my attempts to get schooling were unwarranted'(3). On the pages forty eight, fifty five, sixty three and sixty five, Valmiki recalls his 'ideal teachers' whose 'kicks and fists were not of a teacher but of a goonda', who 'would, first of all, make me aware of my being a Bhangi', who were not teachers but 'illiterate feudal lords', and for whom 'I had not an iota of respect ... in my heart'.

### **Revolting against the canon**

For Omprakash Valmiki the remembrance of the things past means recalling a world turned upside down. The facts of his growing up were so antithetical to what he was being taught, rather, being forced to accept as ideal, true and sublime, that a totally different canon of interpretation and writing began to take birth in his mind. The search for a new canon was a constant preoccupation of Valmiki since his school days, which culminated in his much acclaimed critical work *Dalit Sahityaka Saundaryashastra* (Aesthetics of Dalit Literature) in 2001.

We have seen the type of the interface between the school with its 'idea' teachers and Valmiki the boy who went as a learner to them. In the same vein, he talks about the events like harvesting, rains and marriages in the village, the events which are conventionally billed as harbingers of joy and occasions of being happy and forgetful of anxieties. His experiences of these things were nowhere near having anything like enjoyment and good feelings. His location in the societal set up was such that these events acted in ways opposite to what has been conventionally described in the literature which he was being told to read and cram. For him, his family members and other persons of his community, 'cutting the sheaves of wheat in the midday sun' as poor labourers in the fields of their tormentors was a job which gave them no remuneration but pain and humiliation. There was nothing to sing joyously about and feel at ease in the lap of nature while doing a job assigned by it. For him, there was pain in the heart which was compounded by the hot sun pouring on the head and the 'hot and fiery ground underneath'.

What was it that obstructed the commonality between 'the solitary reaper' of William Wordsworth and Valmiki, the joyless reaper of his feudal lord's crops. The only answer which can be reasonably attempted is the societal location giving birth to the socio-economic relationship which was based on the exploitation of man by man, with the added stigma of being declared polluted and lowly in the caste hierarchy. The tormentors who were in the habit of extracting more and more work and paying less and less wages destroyed the pleasure of working and feeling felicity in the close touch of soil and plants. In the final analysis, Valmiki found himself as a growing dalit man, confronted with the problem of inequality and its collateral pains.

In the series of conventional 'beauties' lying prominently demolished and in rubbles are the events of the rainy season and marriage occasions. For Omprakash Valmiki and his community, the marriage ceremony in the 'mansions' of the upper caste people meant sitting outside with baskets to collect the leftovers after the guests had departed after their dinners and suppers. It is germane here to go into what happened at the experiential level of Valmiki's mind when there was a marriage ceremony among his own caste people. 'Is it right to go for *salaam*'(32)?, he asked angrily on one such occasion. This angry

question strikes heavily on the feudal practice of going for *salaam* (obsequious salutations) by the bridegrooms of the dalit community at the time of marriage. The bridegroom Hiram Singh, who is Valmiki's friend, gets ready to go to bid *salaam* to the upper caste people in whose houses his mother-in-law worked as a maid-servant. Our writer, 'with an uneasy feeling inside' succumbs to the friend's pressure to accompany him on the ignominious *salaam* journey, but after having 'a big argument' against the indignities involved in this social practice which was reflective, to the naked human eyes, of the feudal feelings of high and low in the caste hierarchy, all based on the sheer accident of birth. Even the joyous occasion of marriage was not free from the blot of casteism and its attendant socio-cultural manifestations.

In the memory of Omprakash Valmiki the days of the rainy season come as a metaphor of 'living hell'. The lanes of the dalit *mohalla* became filled with mud which, when getting mixed with the pigs' excreta, added horribly to the stink which hovered all around the mud huts of the dalits. Flies and mosquitoes multiplied their numbers and their power to turn life's days and nights into nightmares. He writes, 'Literature can only imagine hell. For us the rainy season was a living hell. This terrible suffering of village life has not even been touched upon by the epic poets of Hindi. What a monstrous truth that is' (Valmiki ).

### **Only a dalit can write about dalits' life**

The foregoing discussion of Valmiki's relationships with his school and teachers, his 'scratched on glass' memories of the occasions of harvesting, rains and marriage goes sufficiently to prove that his argument as a mature dalit literary critic that writing in the literary way about the dalits can be done only by dalits an argument marshalled strongly in his *Dalit Sahityaka Saundaryashastra*, has experiential validity. It is remarkable here that the sufferings of the author come to us not as those of an individual but of the entire community to which he belongs.

As we have seen in the foregoing discussion of the disconnect between Valmiki's life experiences and the lessons which were being dinned into his mind, there was definitely a disjuncture in his case as a sensitive and perceptive mind which was growing in an 'alien' socio-cultural environment. But there was another important, though secondary, factor which motivated his search for an aesthetic suitable for an authentic expression of dalit experiences. He recalls here that when he tried to get his literary endeavours published in established literary journals (he means the then Hindi literary magazine, *Sarika*), he had to undergo bitter experiences. He wrote a short story, *Jangalki Rani* (The Queen of the Jungle), based on adivasi life and sent it for publication to *Sarika*, and got an acceptance letter which gave him joy; but that joy did not fructify in actuality. After too long a time, i.e., ten years he received back his story with the remark that he should send it again if he wanted to wait longer. He recalls with sharp directness, 'the literary establishment crushes newly sprouted talent' and asks poignantly 'who knows how many writers like me were nipped in the bud by the *Sarika* editorial board' (123)?

### **Munshi Premchand through a dalit lens**

It would be worthwhile in the present context to back up Valmiki's arguments in favour of a dalit literary aesthetic through a reading of his assessment of some eminent

authors. This purpose would best be served if we have an idea of what he has said about the much discussed and acclaimed work of Munshi Premchand who is considered by some literary critics as the greatest Hindi novelist. Valmiki, in his study of *Kafan* (The Shroud), he finds fault with Premchand's characterization of the dalit men there, suggesting that the writer wrongly conflates dalits with farmers and peasants who face economic exploitation, but who do not suffer from the specific problems born out of the system of caste inequality. He writes, 'The characters of Ghisu and Madhav in his story *Kafan* are Chamars, but the story does not raise any issue that is related to the problems of Chamars or dalits. There is only a detailed depiction of their idleness and heartlessness' (Valmiki 2004: 28). As with other dalit writers, Valmiki's objection to Premchand being regarded as a writer on the side of dalits has its basis in his assessment that his characterization of characters remains unfocussed on the issues of caste-related issues. He wants caste to be in the prime focus, not to be conflated with economic issues. A careful reading of Omprakash Valmiki's memoir goes to suggest that he is not oblivious of the economic issues faced by the dalits. He records so many situations in his and his family members' lives where poverty heaped so many hardships, but his search for an aesthetic adequately equipped to express dalit selfhood has a clear-cut path which does not veer into any kind of economism. That is why he does not agree with the Marxist critics who insist on putting all peasants, labourers and dalits in the same box while thinking about the problem of exploitation and the resultant deprivation. His primary concern is not class but caste, and from this concern flows his premise (which is the premise of other dalit theoreticians of dalit literary representation like Sharankumar Limbale and Arjun Dangle) that dalit literature can be written by dalits only. This premise is based on the idea that a non-dalit, however sympathetic he may be towards the sufferings of the dalits, will not have the 'epic' strength to enter into the minds of the dalits. We come across very interestingly illustrative accounts of this aesthetic premise in Valmiki's critical work. During a discussion on dalit writings and writing about dalits, a famous Hindi fiction writer, Kashinath Singh, pushed his point through a metaphorical assertion that 'It is not necessary to be a horse to write on horses'. Valmiki retorted that 'A writer can write well on the physique of the horse, but one cannot fathom the depth of the pain in the mind of the hungry and thirsty. Only the horse can know what form of the exploiting master comes in his imagination (ibid. x).

### **Proud of being a Valmiki**

Valmiki believes that the casteist *savarna* have retained the deep-seated age-old tendency to cast doubts on the intelligence and ability of the educated dalits, leading to fear in their minds which results into such attempts at changing caste markers. He considers it the easiest and ineffective way to run away from the problem, and suggests that the real change will come only through struggle and engagement. So, he does not want to be deprived of the 'educational experience' of being in the storm of those ideas and prejudices which lead to 'the dialogue on the internal contradictions of the Hindu society'. He is not afraid of being 'seen as a sanitation employee' (130) if he keeps using 'Valmiki' as his surname. It is a part of his fearlessness that that he keeps using it because it has become his 'badge of identity' (the famous Dalit literary critic Dr. Dharmvir's suggestion to him during a discussion on the 'negativity' his surname generates). He counters the suggestions of his close relatives, alit intellectuals and even of a writer like

Mohandas Namishray (whom he admires) in this connection. He knows that his worth is undervalued because of it, recalling that in his early days he used to be angry and would clash with the irrational under valuers. But at the time of writing his autobiography he has achieved the calm mature wisdom that he is contending with a social disease and engaged in a battle which cannot be won in a day.

### **Sociologically empirical**

A careful reading of this memoir tells us that the author is ,to use the American novelist David Foster Wallace's phrase with a slight mutation, 'not marooned in his own skull'. Keeping this central plank in the constant view, he exercises analysis and criticism of every issue which, hethinks, retards the progress towards equality or weakens the struggle to free the mind from casteism. His honest courage as an intellectual-activist takes him with an open mind into the problems of internal contradictions among the dalits and Uncle Tomism in the behavior of some educated ones. He laments the fact ,in the context of the miserable condition of dalit *bastis* which he visited in Maharashtra, that the activists, even though they 'talked outwardly of forgetting the differences between Mahars,Mangs, Chamars and Mehtars, internally they were caught in the clutches of these beliefs' (109).

This autobiography informs us that Valmiki had a liking for the world of books and ideas right from his student days. One gets the insight here that in the formation of his mental make-up and reflective inclination toward the analysis of socio-cultural and literary issues, books and ideas contained in them played a considerable role. Before being introduced to Dr.Ambedkar's thought through Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu's *Dr.Ambedkar: A Biography*, he had read several books on Mahatma Gandhi. Through his reading he acquainted himself with the thoughts of men like Nehru, Dr.Rajendra Prasad, S.RadhaKrishnan, Swami Vivekanand, Tagore, Savarkar, BhagatSingh, Subhash Chandra Bose and some others. His memory of the time when he read all these takes out a very significant comment from him about the neglect of Dr.Ambedkar by his institution *Tyagi Inter College, Barla*.The college library did not have a single book on him. Not only that 'on the Republic Day when narratives of devotion to the country were repeatedly told, but they never included the name of the maker of the constitution. All the media of communication had been unable to inform people like me about this name' (71).

### **Conclusion**

The autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki presents the portrait of a sensitive, creative ,intelligent and socially responsible person whose hallmark is a honest and true understanding of the socio-cultural situation in which he finds himself, and a heart-felt concern and commitment to the work for its betterment. His attitude to life and society is progressive and rational. He is not content with the idea of just personal justice and well-being; he has got a largeness of sympathy and empathy which drives him toward socially responsible thinking and activities for what is called justice for all. He is fearless in implementing his views in real life situations. He rejects false ideals, and is able to break the prison walls of inherited irrationality, illusion and backward-looking thinking. He chastises what is faulty and condemnable. He raises questions about the prevailing unacceptable aspects of the Indian society, seeks their answers and finds them through his

analysis and creative endeavours conjoined by his actions on the actual ground in the socio-cultural arena. The message from this memoir is ---- facta, nonverba ( deeds, not words).

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