

Dalitic Approach by Omprakash Valmiki By His ,“Joothan - A Life of Dalit”.

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Abstract

Dalit literature is literature written by the Dalits about their lives. Dalit literature forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. Dalit literature emerged in the 1960s, starting with the Marathi language, and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Bangla and Tamil languages, through narratives such as poems, short stories, and, most, autobiographies, which stood out due to their stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene.

Dalit literature denounced as petty and false the then prevailing portrayal of life by the mainstream Marathi literature which lacked mention of the abject poverty-stricken lifestyle of the Dalits and the utter oppression the Dalits faced, at that time, from the higher castes. It is often compared with African-American literature especially in its depiction of issues of racial segregation and injustice, as seen in slave narratives.

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.

KEYWORDS: Humiliation, Poverty, Encapsulates, Garbage, Depiction.

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Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is an autobiographical account of his growing up years as an untouchable in a village in Uttar Pradesh in the newly independent India of the 1950's. *Joothan*, as I hope you all know, literally means left over from a meal. In another sense it also means polluted or unfit for consumption by another person. Yet for centuries, the Dalits have been forced, under various circumstances, to eat 'Joothan' for their subsistence. Thus the title of the book *Joothan* conveys the pain and humiliation faced by the author and his community, which has remained at the bottom of the social ladder for centuries. The community has been treated like 'Joothan', to be used and thrown away in the dustbins by the upper castes. Valmiki's account of his early life is an account of the heroic struggle by a dalit boy from the sweeper caste (Bhangi, chuhra) against impossible odds to get an education.

Omprakash Valmiki is an important figure in the Dalit movement in India. His own struggle made him realize that the condition of the Dalits can only change through revolutionary transformation of society and the human consciousness. Under the influence of

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Valmiki and other Dalit writers have tried to build up a critical Dalit consciousness in their writings that allows for pride, self-respect and a vision of the future. Valmiki and others felt the need for a separate Dalit consciousness or 'Dalit Chetna' because Indian literature, more or less, had ignored the Dalit voice. Often the Dalits were portrayed as villains of an unjust social system in need of saviours and the sympathy of the higher castes. Even a writer like Premchand, felt Valmiki and others, had failed the Dalits. Through Premchand is extremely sympathetic to the Dalits, he failed to give them a voice or agency. The Dalits in his stories, as you must have noticed in *Deliverance* suffer but hardly ever protest. In other words Valmiki and others felt that even Premchand lacked the Dalit consciousness. His story *Kafan* on the other hand is considered as anti-Dalit because the Dalits in the story are presented as lazy and drunk. It is in this context that the contribution of Valmiki and other Dalit writers assumes importance. Dalit Chetna: What then is this 'Dalit Chetna'? Valmiki, in his book *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundarya* defines Dalit as people deprived of human rights on a social level. Thus their chetna or consciousness is 'Dalit Chetna'. 'Dalit Chetna' is a revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It strives to make the Dalits conscious of their 'Dalit condition', which is a byproduct of an oppressive caste order. This emancipatory ideology is rooted in Ambedkarite thought. Some of the key features of 'Dalit Chetna' are:

- i) It is based on the welcoming vision of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on the question of freedom and independence.
- ii) It rejects caste system, casteism, communalism and all hierarchies of language and privilege.
- iii) It rejects Brahminism, feudalism and all notions of supremacy.
- iv) It rejects traditional theories of aesthetics as elitist and motivated.

Consequently Dalit critics as well as writers have focused their attention on devoting an alternative aesthetics of Dalit literature. And quite appropriately they begin by examining the location and socio-political stance of the existing literature in relation to Dalits. The focus is on writing that includes Dalit characters, description of Dalit life and experience so that the Dalit is accorded a subject position. In other words the attempt is to have the Dalit writing rather than being written about.

THE USE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY:

One of the objectives of this book is to introduce you to various kinds of writings dealing with, roughly, the same issue. In this section the issue is Caste/Class. The idea, obviously, is to examine the way language and the choice of the genre shapes the presentation as well as the construction of meaning in different kinds of writing. The first text in this section is a polemical essay by Jotirao Phule. The second text is a short story by Premchand. While Phule's essay tries to arouse the consciousness of the Dalit by presenting rational arguments against the caste system, Premchand presents the pitiable condition of Dukhi, a Dalit, under an unjust and heartless caste order through the use of irony. Both the texts present a critique of the oppressive caste system in different ways.

Valmiki, on the other hand, uses autobiography to make the same point. Valmiki's choice of genre is quite deliberate. But why the autobiography? Autobiography, as you know, is a conscious literary genre that deals with the varied dimensions of personality of the subject. The author, in this form, is able to convey a sense of not just his whole life but also a sense of what it was like to have lived it at several stages. In other words, the author is able to present a lived experience from his own point of view. He is able to combine biographical facts and experiences from his point of view and at the same time is 'true to life' as well. If you recall our discussion of Dalit Chetna in section 1.1, you will recall that one of the major focus of this movement is to present the lived experiences of the Dalit from a Dalit point of view. In other words the focus is to present authentic Dalit experience from a Dalit subject position. Autobiography then, becomes the most appropriate genre to present Dalit consciousness.

Joothan

This short extract is taken from the book Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki. Valmiki manages to do three things in this extract:

- a) He gives a brief description of the physical as well as the psychological space occupied by the Chuhras in the village as a matrix of their social existence.
- b) He describes, very briefly, the day to day struggle of the untouchables to arrange two square meals for themselves. At the same time he is able to demonstrate that the economic deprivation of the untouchables is the consequence of the Hindu caste order.
- c) He chronicles his own struggle to get an education in the village school. His story demonstrates that it is indeed possible for the untouchables, despite the hardships and deprivations, to emancipate themselves by persistent struggle and determination.

The first part of this extract, very quickly, paints the sub-human living conditions of the Chuhras in the village. The Chuhras, Valmiki's own caste, lived across the pond, which

acted as a natural barrier between the upper caste quarters and the untouchables. It demarcates not just the physical space occupied by the upper and the lower castes, but the two different worlds of existence. The Chuhras exist among filth and deprivation. The description of the basti gives us a sense of the utter deprivation faced by the untouchable community. There is an all pervading stink and one could see pigs, dogs and children roaming around in the narrow streets of this basti. In short the Chuhras lived in a physical and social space devoid of human dignity, obviously as a consequence of the caste system. Thus Valmiki's early childhood is marked by this utter deprivation and lack of dignity.

The social and psychological deprivation is compounded by economic deprivation as well. Though every member of the Valmiki household worked it was difficult for them to arrange for two decent meals in a day. This economic deprivation is also a consequence of the caste order. The Chuhras did all kinds of works for the Tagas (upper caste people) and often without pay because they dare not refuse the Tagas. Due to their lowly social position they were often abused by the upper castes and made to work for free. They were considered polluted and less than human. Ironically, one could touch animals but not Chuhras. Thus they were regarded as things to be used and abused at the convenience of the upper castes.

It is within this sub-human context that Valmiki's struggle for an education begins. The government schools, though officially open for the untouchables, refused admission to them. It was a generous Sevak Ram Masihi, a Christian, who took Valmiki into his open air school. But after a tiff with Sevak Ram, Valmiki's father took him to the Basic Primary school. After a prolonged period of begging and cajoling, Master HarPhool Singh allowed Valmiki into the school. It is important to remember that all this was happening eight years after India became independent. The practice of untouchability was very much a feature of this school. The untouchables, there were two more of them in Valmiki's class, were made to sit away from the others. What is heartening though is that the three untouchable children, though from different castes, had a bond of solidarity. Despite the humiliation by fellow students as well as the teachers the three of them persisted and continued in the school.

The experience at the school, described in these passages, highlight the cruelty and heartlessness of the teachers and fellow students. It got worse with the new Headmaster Kaliram. They 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 their school used swear words on a regular basis. This is a very effective reply to the critics who frowned upon the use of swear words in Valmiki's stories. 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.

The experience at the school leaves a lasting impression on the young Valmiki. For instance the image of the guru 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. However the turning point for him as well as his father was an especially humiliating experience forced upon the young Valmiki by the Headmaster

Kaliram who seems to be a rabid casteist. He orders the frail boy to sweep the school compound day after day. Valmiki 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. With dogged determination Valmiki's father, with the help of the village Pradhan 'ChaudhriSaheb', managed to send him back to school thus ensuring that his own son as well as others are not denied education in the village school because of their caste.

Joothan, 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.

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