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OM PRAKASH VALMIKI'S *JOOZHAN*: THE DEPICTION OF PAIN AND RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Dalit Literature is the literature about the Dalits, an oppressed Indian class under the Indian caste system. It forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. This literature emerged into the forefront after 1960. It started with the Marathi language and soon appeared in other Indian languages through narratives such as poems, short stories and most importantly autobiographies.

Dalit Literature is uniquely Indian as it is a byproduct of an evil caste system that existed for centuries in our country. Although, the constitution of India has abolished the caste system, it still lingers in many walks of life with its grasps as firm as ever on the minds of its people. The literature that arises as an outburst against casteism is Dalit literature.

Dalit or the "Shudras" have been suffering in the name of caste system. Their life is marked with disgrace, humiliation, dishonor, suppression and discrimination. For many years, they have undergone heart-rending and traumatic experiences. The pain that the Dalits had suffered is unbearable which is very effectively portrayed in the autobiography of Om Prakash Valmiki's 'Joothan'.

This paper will try to understand how Om Prakash Valmiki has used his autobiography, 'Joothan', as a means of portrayal of pain and resistance against untouchability.

Key words: Dalit Literature, Indian caste system, autobiography, pain, resistance, discrimination

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Caste System: An Overview

India is one of the fastest growing and developing countries of the world; yet it also has the society that follows the caste system. The word *caste* is derived from the Portuguese *casta* meaning lineage, breed, or race. Caste system in India is deeply rooted and prevalent in India since time immemorial. There is a general consensus that the phenomena of caste and untouchability evolved over a period of time, as a result of conflicts over land, resources and cultural practices between people who called themselves *Aryans* when they began arriving in India about the beginning of the second millennium B.C. In time, these conflicts produced the *chaturvarna* system of society. *Varna* literally means colour and *chaturvarna*, meaning four gradations, comprised of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The Brahmins were the topmost in the order. The

Shudras were destined to serve the upper three ladders, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. The Untouchables occupy a place that is not clearly defined by boundaries and is outside of the varna scheme. Their jobs (such as toilet cleaning and garbage removal) cause them to be considered impure and thus "untouchable." Historically the untouchables were not allowed in temples and many other public places. They were hired to do work that members of the caste system would not do. These jobs included killing or disposing of dead cattle or working with their hides. They also worked as sweepers, washers, or in other jobs that required contact with human emissions such as sweat, urine, or feces.

Mahatma Gandhi referred to the untouchables as the Harijan, a term that means "blessed" because Gandhi believed the Harijan were blessed by their suffering. Recently, many untouchables have rejected Gandhi's term as demeaning. They prefer to call themselves the Dalit, a term that can be translated as "oppressed."

The Dalits

The word *Dalit* means "ground, broken or reduced to pieces generally." It is derived from the Sanskrit word 'dal' which is again borrowed from Hebrew. 'Dal' in Hebrew is used in two senses: 'it may refer either to physical weakness or to a lowly insignificant position in the society.' They have been suffering in the name of the caste system. Their life is marked with disgrace, humiliation, dishonor, suppression and discrimination. For centuries, they have undergone harrowing and traumatic experiences. Their wishes and dreams have been insignificant as they had no right to dream for the world of joy and progress. They were meant to live and serve the people of the higher castes and die for them as well. But with the passage of time, there had been people in the Dalit community who realized the trauma and sufferings of the members of their community and they decided to give voice to their sufferings and pain, through literature. Dalit issues are recorded in a variety of genres- autobiographies, novels, short stories, essays and poetry.

Dalit pain is unbearable. We can very easily understand their pain only if we come across the literature which is full of pain, miseries and anguish of Dalits. Literature became a very effective tool for the Dalits to express their trauma as well as anger against the embarrassment and ill-treatment meted out to them. Prominent writers in Dalit writings are Mulk Raj Anand, Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Basudev Sunani, Bama, Sharankumar Limbale, Lakshman Gaekwad, Sivakami, Poonami, Om Prakash Valmiki etc.

Dalits have expressed their trauma very delicately and clearly in a much uncomplicated manner in their writings and hence their literature became a tool of resistance. Their literature does convey a message to the Dalit community that they will never accomplish respectable position in the society unless they resist against all the wrongs done to them.

About the Author

Om Prakash Valmiki (30 June 1950 – 17 November 2013) was an Indian Dalit writer and poet. He is well known for his autobiography, *Joothan*, considered a milestone in Dalit literature. He was born at the village of Barla in the Muzzafarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh. After retirement from Government Ordnance Factory he lived in Dehradun where he died of complications arising out of stomach cancer on 17 November 2013.

Being a Dalit child, he was tortured and abused everywhere in society. He was fortunate enough to be born in a household where everyone loved and cared for him. The support and encouragement he gained from the family enabled him to face the dangers of being a Dalit. Right from the early stages of his life, Valmiki was conscious of the importance of studies and hence he was always a bright student. Reading and writing made him an enlightened human being. Valmiki married Chanda; despite the protestations his father accepted her as his daughter-in-law. He was not allotted a house in the government colony. They had to struggle a lot during the initial days of marriage. But he soon settled and both Valmiki and Chanda started a happy married life.

Besides his autobiography 'Joothan' (1997) Valmiki published three collections of poetry *Sadiyon Ka Santaap*(1989) *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka* (1997), and *Ab Aur Nahin* (2009); and two collections of short stories *Salaam* (2000), and *Ghuspethiye* (2004). He also wrote *Dalit Saahitya Ka Saundaryshastra* (2001), and a history of the Valmiki community, *Safai Devata* (2009), *Do Chera*(Play).

'Joothan'

Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki is a work of Dalit literature, first published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003. It is a memoir of growing up as an 'untouchable' starting in the 1950s outside a typical village in Uttar Pradesh. Told as a series of piercing vignettes, *Joothan* is also a remarkable record of a rare Indian journey, one that took a boy from extremely wretched socioeconomic conditions to prominence as an author and social critic.

In his novel '*Joothan*', Valmiki described about the discrimination they had to face in the school at different points. 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" (J16). Om Prakash 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. Although untouchability was abolished in 1949, Dalits continued to face discrimination, economic deprivation, violence, and ridicule.

Om Prakash Valmiki begins his autobiography by stating, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionate towards Dalits." (Jvii) Valmiki describes how his entire community depends on the leftover food thrown out by the upper castes in return for their hard but unpaid work. The entire community had to depend on the mercy of the upper castes who, instead of paying labour, exploit them. The title of the autobiography '*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. Valmiki, gives a detailed description of collecting, preserving and eating *joothan*. He was assigned the work to guard the drying *joothan* from crows and chickens. They used to relish the dried and reprocessed *joothan*. These memories of the past burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present.

Throughout the novel, Valmiki repeatedly narrates his experiences of pain as exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. He writes, "I was kept out of extracurricular 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 descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door." (J16)

In another instance, he states how he was continually kept out of the chemistry lab 'on some pretext or the other'. He tried to talk and complain to the principal about this. But no action was taken against the teacher instead he was not able to conduct any experiments for the entire year. He writes, "Not only did I do very poorly in the lab tests in the board exam, I also got low marks in the oral, even though I had answered the examiner's questions quite correctly." (J65)

In *Joothan*, Valmiki describes the harsh reality of his childhood in the village in the Barla district of Uttar Pradesh. He writes about the ill treatment done to him when he was at school just because he was an untouchable. He writes, "I had to sit away from the others in the class, and that too on the floor. The mat ran out before door....sometimes they would beat me without any reason" (J2). There was another instance when he was in Class VI. He was asked by the head master to sweep the classrooms and the playground. He states, "The playground was way larger than my small physique could handle and in cleaning it, my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. Dust had gone inside my mouth. 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 a drink of water" (J5).

Valmiki was fortunate enough to have a family that supported him to study and get rid of the life that the others in the community were leading. The novel is dedicated to his mother and father, both portrayed as heroic figures, who desired something better for their child and fought for his safety and growth with tremendous courage. Valmiki's father's ambitions for his son are evident in the nickname, Munshiji, that he

gives to Valmiki. In relation to this Valmiki describes an incident in the novel where he was made to sweep the playground of the school by the head master. He states, "Just then my father passed by the school. He stopped abruptly when he saw me sweeping the school compound. He called me, 'Munshiji, what are you doing?' When I saw him I burst out sobbing. He entered the school compound and came towards me. Seeing me crying, he asked, 'Munshiji, why are you crying? Tell me, what has happened?'

"I told the whole story to my father: that the teachers had been making me sweep for the last three days; that they did not let me enter the classroom at all."

His father confronted the teachers and then walking away from the school holding Valmiki's hand, he said loudly enough for the head master to hear, "You are a teacher...So I am leaving you. But remember this much, Master This Chuhre ka will study right here.....in this school. And not just him, but there will be more coming after him"(J6).His father had all sorts of weaknesses, but the decisive turn that he gave his future that day has had great impact on Valmiki's personality.

One of the most powerful moments in the novel is when Valmiki's mother overturns a basket full of joothan before Mr. Tyagi, against humiliation. Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty pattals and said, "You are taking a basket full of joothan. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going." That instant she emptied the basket right there and said to Sukhdev Singh, "Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis tomorrow morning" (J11). She confronted him like a "lioness" when he pounced on to hit her. This act of defiance by Valmiki's mother sows the seeds of rebellion in the child Valmiki.

Conclusion

Om Prakash Valmiki suffered a lot in his lifetime. He had very bad experiences of the life. However he says "Times have changed. But there is something somewhere that continues to irk"(J134). Joothan is a book that voices the demand of the Dalits for their rightful place in the society.

He says, "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." He questions, "Why is my caste my only identity?"(J134)

According to Valmiki, *Joothan* is a manifesto for evolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness. The novel contrasts its readers with different questions about their own humanity and invites them to join the universal projects of human liberation."

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