

OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S JOOTHAN: A SURVEY OF A DALIT'S MISERABLE LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature is the literature about the Dalits (untouchables). It depicts about an oppressed Indian class under the Indian caste system. This literature comes forth in the form of exploitation that is based on class, race, caste or profession. This literature emerged into the forefront after 1960. It origins with the Marathi language and soon materialized in different Indian languages through accounts such as poems, short stories and most importantly autobiographies.

KEYWORDS: *Dalit Literature, Confront the Humiliations*

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INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature is uncustomary Indian as it is offshoot of an evil caste system that perished for centuries in our country. Although, Indian constitution has annihilated the caste system, it still lingers in many walks of life with its grips as firm as ever on the minds of its people. Dalit literature arises as a reaction against casteism.

Omprakash Valmiki is one of the great Hindi Dalit writers. He is a forerunner who laid the foundation of Dalit literature. His ingenious works endeavor to invoke an attitude of self-criticism among the Dalits. "Joothan: A Dalit's life" penned by Omprakash Valmiki is an autobiography of himself. It was published in 1997 in Hindi and later it was translated into English in 2003 by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. These self-account shows off the brutal existent of a Dalit's life by upper caste Hindus. A low caste has to confront the humiliations whether he is child or young. This attempt will try to understand how Omprakash Valmiki has worked his self-account, "Joothan", as a means of sketch of pain, discrimination and humiliation against untouchability.

The word 'Dalit' means "ground, broken or reduced to pieces generally". This word 'Dalit' has been taken from the Sanskrit word 'dal' which is again adopted from Hebrew. It means this word 'Dalit' indicates to a caste particular that has been discriminated, dishonoured and abused. "Joothan: A Dalit's Life" is an autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki's life and his bitter experiences being a dalit. Over the whole country, Dalits constitute about one sixth of India's populations. The author Omprakash Valmiki himself belongs to a 'chuhara' caste that is known as a 'bhangi' in Uttar Pradesh. Omprakash Valmiki himself has stated his idea behind writing the autobiography in the preface of the Hindi edition of the book.

The author 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) Dalits are presented as ‘mute’ and pathetic characters by upper-caste Indian writers who (Dalits) don't have might to speak against the oppression meted out to them. Untouchables occupy a place that is not clearly defined by verges and is outside of the varna scheme. They have works to do such as toilet cleaning and garbage removal for their survival. Their jobs cause them to be considered impure and thus “untouchable”. Historically Dalits were not allowed in temples and many other public places.

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. (Jvii) Valmiki depicts how his entire community depends on the leftover food thrown out by the upper castes in return for their hard but unpaid work. In India, Dalits (untouchables) have been forced to meet and eat joothan for centuries, and the word abstracts the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced to live at the bottom of India’s social pyramid.

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (14 April 1891-6 December 1956), also known as Babasaheb Ambedkar, was an Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer, who inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement and campaigned against social discrimination towards the untouchables (Dalits). He laid the foundation of justice and stressed on equality which is primary need of Dalits. After Jyotirao Phule and Shahu Maharaj it was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who furnished the ideological and intellectual foundations for a sustained review of the caste system. Dalit literature attained the approach and strength of a discordant political movement and challenged the very foundations of Hinduism.

Throughout the novel ‘Joothan’, Omprokash Valmiki narrates about the discrimination they had to face in the school at dissimilar points. He says: “During the examination 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). The adds, “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)

Valmiki says that the chuhars were not seen as human being but considered low than dogs, cats, cows or buffaloes. Upper castes used them (Dalits) as a tool until the work was done and then throw them away. The author Valmiki claims that teachers have the treatment full of hatred to us. They do not treat all the students equally. Valmiki adds that teachers don't miss the chance to discriminate Dalits in all walks of life. Here he tells us one of such happenings that: “Headmaster Bishamber Singh had been replaced by Kaliram. Along with him had come another new teacher. After the arrival of these two, the three of us fell on terrible times. We would be thrashed at the slightest excuse. Ram Singh would escape once in a while, but Sukkan Singh and I got beaten almost daily. I was very weak and skinny those days. (4)

Throughout the novel, Valmiki constantly depicts his experiences of pain as exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. Valmiki narrates the oppressive reality of his childhood in the village in the Barla district of Uttar Pradesh. He narrates about the ill treatment done to him when he was at school just because he was an untouchable. He further adds, “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)

Omprakash Valmiki remembers today that all his teachers could call him by his caste not by name. In this reference he tells that one day the Headmaster Kaliram called him and asked: 'Abey, what is your name?' I answered 'Omprakash' 'Chure ka?' That Headmaster orders me some works to do. He ordered I to climb that tree and break some twigs for making a broom. He also added that I should have to sweep the whole school as it your family occupation. Meanwhile, all students of the class were studying.'

In another instance, he says that how he was constantly kept out of the chemistry lab 'on some pretext or the other'. He seeks to talk and complain to the principal about this. But there was no action against the teacher instead he was not able to conduct any experiments for the entire year. He adds, "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)

Valmiki describes another incident, full of discrimination, had to face him at Tyagi Inter College in Muzaffarnagar. There was a teacher of physical education named Phool Singh Tyagi. He punished the students for stupid reasons. One day a student (Ram Singh) a Chuhra by caste was beaten by him. Tyagi teacher remarked Singh for a common reason, " Abey brother-in-law, progeny of a Chuhra. Let me know when you die. You think you are a hero. Today I am going to draw oil from tresses (47). During all this, the Principal and all the teachers also were watching the situation, but there was no one who could stop Phool Singh because they were not concerned about the Chuhra boy.

Omprakash Valmiki was heaven- sent enough to born a family that handled him to study and get rid of the life that the others in the community were leading. Dr. Ambedkar's life struggle and his ideology prepared the emotional base of Valmiki's poems, short stories and autobiographies.(32) Being a Dalit child like Dr.Ambedkar, he was tortured and abused everywhere in the society. He had to experience an unbearable life that made him broken mentally and physically. When Valmiki's mother turns over a basket full of joothan before Mr. Tyagi at the time of marriage there, against humiliation. A person named Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty pattals and said, "You are taking a basket full of joothon and on the top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going. Instantly 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 faced him like a lioness when he pounced on to hit her. These powerful moments show the seeds of rebellion in the child Valmiki.

Valmiki's interaction with Kulkarni's family led to Kulkarni's daughter Savita falling in love with Valmiki with the thought that he was a Brahmin. But when she came to know the caste of Valmiki, she began shouting. Omprakash Valmiki writes: "She started cry as though my being an SC was a crime. She sobbed for a long time and the distance between us had increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our hearts. What a lie culture and civilization are".(98) This caste discrimination led the both Savita and Valmiki to the permanent separation and they could never meet again.

Dalit pain is unbearable. If we come across the Dalit literature, we can very easily understand their pain, miseries and anguish of them. Omprakash Valmiki suffered a lot in his lifetime. Regarding the contribution of Valmiki in representing the Chuhra community, Raj Kumar writes, "He is convinced that only by raising caste-related issues he will be able to start a discussion on the plight of Dalits at a national level.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have gone through the novel, we can say that the title Joothan : A Dalit's Life indicates that it is about the story of an individual, it speaks about the history of caste-discrimination. From the point of view of Valmiki, Joothan is a manifesto for evolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness. It is a book that voices the demand of the Dalits for their rightful place in the society.

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