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Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*: A Dalit's Deplorable Destiny

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Abstract

*Dalit literary works deal with the suppression and oppression of lower caste and down trodden people. The writers of these works boldly incorporated the agony of Dalits in the caste based Indian society. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* also aims to explore the pathetic conditions of a Dalit boy. It provides us how Dalits are treated in the modern educated India. The present paper tries to give about a Dalit's deplorable destiny from Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*. It critically presents with wide examples from different Dalit autobiographies to substantiate how the Dalits were degraded and humiliated under the upper caste dominated society.*

India is a socio political country where lower caste people called untouchables and Dalits who are humiliated and discriminated under the feet of rich and upper caste society. Umpteen non-Dalit writers brought the agony of down trodden people but they could not explore inner agony of the suppressed minds. Meanwhile after 1960s, Dalit writers emerged with autobiographical works. In spite of having less number of works in English, there is more number of works about Dalits and by Dalits in regional languages. It gains wide acceptability in other Indian languages like Marathi, Malayali, Tamil and Hindi. About the importance of Dalit writers, Boyar Ashok asserts that "The Dalit writers have to be spokes person of his community. He carries the burden of his society on his shoulders. He is aboard and he can even be the prophet to lead his people to the Promised Land" (64). When Dalit writers write autobiographies, it brings awareness of the society among oppressed people. There are many Dalit writers from North India and from them, Omprakash Valmiki is one of the famous Dalit writers. He rightly remarks: "Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive, but also our true portrayals of wrongdoers. Dalit autobiographies will provide inspiration to our future generations" (20).

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is one of the important autobiographies in Dalit literature. The word 'Joothan' means scraps of food left on a plate, intended for the garbage or animals. In the preface of the book, the translator Mukherjee writes about the life of Omprakash Valmiki and other Dalits: "The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community, which not only had to rely on Joothan but also relished it. Valmiki gives a detailed description of collecting, preserving and eating Joothan. His memories of being assigned to guard the drying Joothan from crows and chickens, and of his relishing the dried and reprocessed Joothan burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present" (xxxii).

The title *Joothan* was suggested by Yadav. The autobiography portrays evidently in the very second line of the preface: 'Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations' (vii). It is the memoir of growing up 'untouchable' starting in the 1950s. It is a narrative form about an untouchable boy who grows up in a Tyagi dominated village. Tyagi is an upper caste in the village. Valmiki was experienced heinous conditions under the established caste system. He was born in Chuhra caste which is called untouchable community. Their job was to sweep the roads, clean the cattle barns, wash their bodies and dispose dead animals. They have to work at Tyagi Brahmins' houses and keep everything ready for their normal life. In spite of working a lot for the Tyagis, the Chuhras are treated as dogs because of their caste and illiteracy. Sometimes they are called 'Oe Chuhre' or 'Abey Chuhre.' In that time, they never called Dalit tenderly and tried to keep away from them. Caste is a major problem in India. It is a culture of human beings. Neither upper caste society nor lower caste society expected from it. In connection to this, Sivakami rightly says: "Caste is the real hurdle India has to cross. I think it is a mainstream problem and not of the Dalits alone. We need more authentic spaces to discuss caste because whenever I go to villages to discuss caste with the Dalits, it becomes full of political overtones. The entire country is rooted in caste" (Chatterjee Madhusree. 2010: 11). In this novel, the Tyagi Brahmins got a lot of benefits from Dalits but they treated them as ditched dogs and threw food at them from distance. They ordered Chuhras to leave the village and stayed at outside of the village. He says that "untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human" (2)

The Chuhras as Dalits faced so many problems in their village. They used to live in shelters that were sometimes, especially collapsed because of rain and tempest. Their houses were made of clay. As Chuhras did not have education, they never know how to claim money from government for their loss. Omprakash says: "Our house had sprung leaks

all over. We should set a pot under the leak” (20). In their area, the unpleasant smell was so overpowering that one would throttle within a minute. The pigs meandered in narrow lanes. Dogs and naked children scuttled here and there in the street. Related to this, Omprakash says that “Pigs were very important part of our lives...even our religious ceremonies were incomplete without pigs. The pigs rooting in the compound were not the symbols of dirt to us but of prosperity and so they are today” (12). They face terrible conditions in their area which is called as *basti* which means a small street where poor and downtrodden people lived. It is filled up with muddy water and flies and mosquitoes thrive in rainy season. There is only one drinking well from which the untouchables should take water from it. The conditions in their street are not even explainable by the writer.

Valmiki used to go to school where Dalits were treated as foreigners and outsiders by teachers as well as classmates. He gives his experience in which Dalits were dehumanized. He says: “The children of the *Tyagis* would tease me by calling me ‘*Chuhre ka*’ Sometimes they would beat me without any reason. This was an absurd tormented life that made me introverted and irritable. If I got thirsty in school, then I had to stand near the hand-pump. The boys would beat me in any case, but the teachers also punished me. 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).

Working at home and fields, Omprakash continued his education. He says: “What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan” (10). As he did not have suitable clothes, the upper caste boys used to pull his leg in many ways. Even teachers also disgraced him as he was a Dalit. He mentioned as: “All the teachers were *Tyagis*, and among the students too *Tyagis* were in the majority. No one could afford to say anything against them. 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” (16). All the Dalits are, even in these days also, treated as animals. They were filled fear of touch and talk with upper caste society. We find such type of incidents in real lives and fictions also. Mulk Raj Anand’s first novel *Untouchable* shows the realistic picture of society. He explained the hypocrisy of the upper caste people. In spite of developing, untouchability is seen backside face of India. Most of the people used to say caste was not a problem but caste dominance or culture dominance is strongly indulged in their minds. They cannot forget it. In relation to this, he writes, ‘I feel I have grown up in a cruel and barbaric civilization’ (16). Thus everywhere Dalits and Dalit children were disgraced and treated as dogs.

Dalit writers such as Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Laxman Gaikwad, Sharankumar Limbale and others were the first educated people from their communities. They were role models for their community people. It is one of the challenging tasks to attend school or colleges from uneducated families and slum areas because their culture dominated them to follow their elder's words. For instance a Dalit writer, Laxman Gaikwad was the first student from his community Uchalya who went to attend classes. His relatives and his caste mates also scolded him for going to school as they did not like him to attend the classes. They think that it was not good to be with them. He says that "I was born in a vagabond family with no home, no land to plough, not even a caste to call our own...My childhood was spent in a bird nest-like hut. To enter it, one had to bend their knees" (Gaikwad, 1998: 01). From these poor conditions, it is a difficult thing to be educated but most of the Dalits with their dedication and hard work tried to learn the things from teachers even though they are humiliated. Similarly in this novel, Headmaster Kaliram always treated Dalits like animals. Omprakash remembers:

One day the headmaster Kaliram called me to his room and asked: 'Abey, what is your name?'

'Omprakash,' I answered slowly and fearfully. Children used to feel scared just encountering the headmaster. The entire school was terrified of him.

'Chuhre ka?' Headmaster threw his second question at me.'

'Ji.'

'All right...See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation. Go...get to it. (4)

Omprakash says "not just from my *basti* but from all the surrounding villages of the area, appearing for the high school exams.' When he was in tenth class, he wanted to get good marks but he had to work at home before mathematics examination. He spent one whole day sowing cane under the instructions of a Tyagi. Being humiliated by everybody, including his teachers, he says, "The scars that I have received in the name of caste--even eons won't suffice to heal them" (61). There were many teachers who dehumanized some Dalits. Even teachers disgraced Omprakash as he is a Dalit. "All the teachers were Tyagis, and among the students too Tyagis were in the majority. No one could afford to say anything against them. 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" (16). It was the first time that a boy from Chuhra community passed tenth class. The whole *basti* celebrates it like a festival. It was a great even in their street and community.

Omprakash Valmiki's success in his school studies motivated many co-friends and himself. He wanted to pursue college education in the city of Dehradun where he shared a single room with his brother and uncle who work there. There he used to go to library and read the writings of Dr B.R. Ambedkar and writes he 'had given voice to my muteness' and says that "After reading Ambedkar, I had realized that by naming the untouchables Harijans, Gandhi had not helped them to join the national main stream, but had saved the Hindus from becoming a minority. Guarded their interests, in fact. And yet, these upper castes were angry with him because he had turned Harijans' heads! The Poona Pact episode had completely erased any illusions I had harboured about Gandhi. It was the Poona Pact that had made Ambedkar lose heart" (72). He continues: "A new word 'Dali' entered my vocabulary, a word that is not a substitute for 'Harijan' but an expression of rage of millions of untouchables" (72).

In Dehradun, Omprakash used to spend more time in college. He was even thrown his uncle's house on account of his late 'working' hours in college. His uncle threatened him to go back to his village but Omprakash, as a stubborn man, did not go back and planned to accept his words. When he got a job, he abandoned his education. His father said that "at last you have escaped 'caste' (78). He was trained in the factory. He appeared for a competitive examination. He was selected and sent to Jabalpur for further training. It was indeed a new experience for him as he says: "The new surroundings and the new environment gave me new experiences. The hostel was huge, large enough to accommodate up to five hundred students. The rooms were very large and ten to twelve students shared a room. The students had come from different parts of the country" (84). In other way, the Marxist ideas are the real Dalit ideas which mean protest against unlawful illegal and inequality activities. He got Marxist ideals with the new atmosphere and new acquaintances. Related to this, he says: "Jabalpur changed me. My speech patterns changed. My manners also changed. I made friends who were deeply interested in contemporary issues and constantly argued about them. I took part in seminars and cultural functions. I became involved in Jabalpur's literary life. I also began to develop my own views on literature. I was more attracted to social realism than to aestheticist and formalist types of writings" (85). He was appointed to the Ordinance factory in Chandrapur (Chanda). It was during his Chandrapur days that he became totally absorbed in the strong currents of Dalit movement. According to him, "It was in this part of the country I came across the marvellous glow of dalit consciousness. The selffulfilment that I experienced in connecting with the Dalit movement was a truly unique experience for me. The deeper my involvement became with the movement, the further many of my friends moved away from me. In their eyes, I had wandered away from the right path and was bent on destroying my talent and creativity"

(100). Washer men too refused to help Chuhras. In directly the writer suggests that Dalits were neglected and rejected from the society. Thus the writer realized that one can somehow get rid of poverty and depravation. Baby Kamble in the book *The Prisons We Broke* describes that Dalits should get education so that they come to know what the things are happening in the world. Valmiki too suggest that Dalits would be developed when they have good education. They should be changed but their culture must be preserved. Valmiki is commanded to delete his surname Valmiki because it indicates a Brahmin. He proudly talks about the surname Valmiki. He says that “This surname is now an indispensable part of my name. Omprakash has no identity without it. ‘Identity ‘and ‘recognition’, the two words say a lot by themselves. Dr. Ambedkar was born in a Dalit family. But Ambedkar signifies a Brahmin caste name; it was a pseudonym given by a Brahmin teacher of his. When joined with ‘Bhimrao’ however it becomes his identity, completely changing its meaning in the process. Today ‘Bhimrao’ has no meaning without ‘Ambedkar’ (132). In this way, Dalits are still catagorised on the basis of their caste and illiteracy. Educate people unfortunately don’t announce that they belong to Dalits. They proudly say that they are Christians and from other religions instead of giving the importance to their caste. Dalits should proudly utter that they are Dalits so that they will be given good priority in the society and it can make other Dalits about the importance of their caste otherwise Dalits lose their identity.

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