

## OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S *JOOOTHAN*: A PORTRAYAL OF PAIN AND RESISTANCE

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### ABSTRACT

*Dalit literature forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. It is the writing about Dalit by Dalit with Dalit consciousness. It artistically portrays the trials and tribulations, humiliations, sorrows and sufferings experienced by Dalits for an age old time. Dalit's subaltern status is inherited from birth and it is sanctioned by sacred authority, and, hence, it is eternal and unalterable. Omprakash Valmiki being the iconic doyen of Dalit literature, by writing his autobiography Joothan, gives voice to the age old humiliation, oppression, exploitation and discrimination meted out to him and to his society in general. He narrates his agony and anguish in the most pathetic and poignant words, and, consequently, his harrowing and grievous tale brings to the fore the oppression and persecution as hurtful as slavery and as demeaning as apartheid. He says that Dalit life is excruciatingly painful and it is seared by experiences that managed to find a literary shape and form. This short paper endeavours to study how Joothan sketches a tormenting and agonizing but truthful account of Valmiki's sorrows and sufferings in an extremely hostile and prejudiced social order. It will also take into account how after getting education Valmiki learns to embrace his identity and becomes a spokesman for his community.*

**Key Words:** *Subaltern, Apartheid, Oppression, Persecution, Slavery.*

Dalit literature is that literature which artistically delineates with the trials and tribulations, humiliations, exploitations, sorrows, sufferings, and pains and poverty experienced by Dalits for an age old time. Sharan Kumar Limbale rightly points out, "By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious; to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering".<sup>1</sup> Dalit writers' theorizing about the need, role, content and form of Dalit literature constitutes the answer to Gaytri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question, 'Can the subaltern speak'? The shape and nature of the Dalit's subalternity is quite unlike those produced by colonial relations. Dalit's subaltern status is inherited from birth and sanctioned by sacred authority, and, hence, it is eternal and unalterable. Omprakash Valmiki being the iconic doyen of Dalit literature, by writing his autobiography *Joothan*, gives voice to the age old anguish and humiliation, oppression, exploitation and injustice meted out to him and to his society in general. He begins his autobiography by pointing out that Dalit life is excruciatingly painful and it is charred by experiences that managed to find literary shape and form. It is in this context that Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*: became a path breaking autobiographical account of his birth

and upbringing as a Dalit in the newly independent India of the 1950's from an insider's perspective. In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki deals with the humiliating treatment given to the Dalits that stemmed from the psyche of the people belonging to the upper castes. This humiliation took the form of words, symbols and gestures used to denigrate them in both verbal and physical form. Before these autobiographies that formed the main body of Dalit literature came out, the Dalits were the proverbial invisible men and women of India who were forced to live on the margins of society. Valmiki tells a poignant story of growing up in a village, a story of survival of oppression as hurtful as slavery, as demeaning as apartheid, and also a story of victory as the author after getting education learns to embrace his identity and becomes a spokesman for his community. Joothan in Hindi means scraps of food left on an eater's plate, usually destined for the garbage. The translator of Valmiki's *Joothan*, Arun Prabha Mukherjee, says:

“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 collective preserving and eating joothan”.<sup>2</sup>

India's untouchables have been forced to accept and eat 'Joothan' for their subsistence for centuries and Valmiki uses it to express his pain and humiliation. *Joothan* broke new ground and mapped a new territory to bring out the sufferings of a stigmatized and oppressed community. It was translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003 who added an excellent introduction in the 2007 edition. After reading Valmiki's work, Mukherjee was overwhelmed by it and as she says:

“I wanted to translate it the moment I finished reading it. I wanted to share this text with a wider readership in the hope that they too will feel its transformative power. Here in *Joothan* readers of English language texts will find another answer to Gayatri Spivak's famous question: ‘Can the Subaltern speak’? ... Very little of Dalit literature is available in translation. High class and upper class Indian voices, whether in India or in the Diaspora, continues to stand in for the Indian voice. It is time that this hegemony should be ruptured and other voices should also be heard. It is time now that they should be read in other parts of the world besides India. I hope that the English translation of *Joothan* will enlarge Valmiki's readership manifold”.<sup>3</sup>

The translated version by Mukherjee brings the reader in direct contact with the Dalit voice filled with pain, anger and the need for transformative urgency. Society, culture and history have placed them in a situation that can only be imagined. Their suppression and oppression extends to all the religious cultures of India rather the whole subcontinent for ages. So great is the translator's empathy with the experience and vision of Valmiki that one tends to forget that it is a translation. It is a remarkable feat by the translator who brings out the linguistic and the socio-cultural cadences of Valmiki's account. *Joothan* dwells upon the various aspects of Valmiki's life, his personal intense struggles and the excruciating and painful life of his community in general. The writer belongs to the Valmiki community. Valmiki or Balmiki was widely adopted as a

caste name by the Chuhras of Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh under the influence of the Arya Samaj, and also as a rejection of and protest against Hindu authority. It was an assertion of their identity and also of their human rights. In school and college, Omprakash Valmiki says he faced a lot of comments about his surname while some saw it as an act of courage. He says:

“They argued that when an untouchable, a person from a caste considered low, uses his caste name as his surname, with a feeling of self-assertion, he is being very brave. One gentleman has ripped this argument to pieces: 'What is so brave about that? ... After all he is a Chuhra, his surnamespare us the hassle of asking what his caste is'”.<sup>4</sup>

Though this autobiography is written at a young age, Valmiki has shown that he may have gone through the travails and trauma of being an untouchable but he is no longer unlearned, his voice is not unheard. As seen in the 2010 Jaipur Literary Festival, his sessions were the ones that were most-crowded and *Joothan* was among the first books to be sold out.

*Joothan* is a memoir of growing up as an 'untouchable' in the 1950's outside a typical village in Uttar Pradesh. It is a remarkable record of a rare Indian journey which has been told as a series of heart-rending vignettes that show how a boy from an extremely wretched socio economic background rose to prominence as an author and social critic. Valmiki was born into the Chuhra caste (aka Bhangi) in a village near Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh whose job was to sweep the roads, clean the cattle barns, dispose of dead animals, work in the fields during harvests and perform other physical tasks for people belonging to upper castes including the prominent Tyagi Brahmins. The Chuhra people were never addressed by name by the Tyagis. It was only 'Oe Chuhre or 'Abey Chuhre'. Valmiki says: "Untouchability was so rampant 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 humans".<sup>5</sup> During his childhood, his entire family worked yet they didn't manage to get two decent meals a day. They lived in the Chuhra basti, a cluster of shanties beside a pond called Dabbowali. The upper caste men and women came to the edge of the pond and used it as an open-air lavatory to shit, squatting across from the Chuhra homes with their private parts exposed. The purdah observing women would discuss the quarrels of the village during this time like a Round-Table Conference. Valmiki says: "The stench was so overpowering that one could choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, dirty fights, this was the environment of my childhood".<sup>6</sup>

During the rainy season things would get worse. The clay houses would collapse and in the pouring rain they had to repair and rebuild on their own. Valmiki's education started when a Christian, Sewak Ram Masihi, who taught Chuhra children to read and write, taught him the alphabet. Valmiki's strength was his parents who were determined to give him a better future. In spite of the new laws of the Constitution, his father had great difficulty in getting him enrolled in a primary school. When he was finally admitted, he was made to squat on the floor while other students sat on the benches. He was not allowed to participate in extra-curricular activities, and

made to sweep and clean the school and adjoining grounds. The headmaster who made him do all this tortured him incessantly: "The headmaster had pounced on my neck. The pressure of his fingers was increasing. As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged me out of the class, and threw me on the ground. He screamed, 'Go sweep the whole playground... Otherwise I will throw you out of school'"<sup>7</sup>By chance, his father passed by and saw him sweeping the ground. Between sobs and hiccups, the boy told him everything. His father with eyes-blazing shouted loudly: "Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep."<sup>8</sup> All the teachers along with the headmaster, Kaliram, came out and started abusing his father telling him to take his son away. Their threats had no effect on his father. Valmiki says: "I have never forgotten the courage and fortitude with which my father confronted the headmaster that day. Pitaji had all sorts of weaknesses but the decisive turn that he gave my future that day has had a great impact on my personality." <sup>9</sup>

His father got no support from any of the Tyagis of the village; instead they found nothing wrong in what Kaliram had done. Ultimately, it was the village Pradhan who got him reinstated in the school yet he remained constantly in fear of his teachers. Even though he was good in studies, he was given such low marks in the practical exams that he failed the board exam. In a bitter invective, Valmiki writes: "Such were the model teachers I had to deal with moving from childhood to adolescence when my personality was being shaped, I had to live in this terror-filled environment... At times, I feel like I grew up in a cruel and barbaric civilization."<sup>10</sup>

Valmiki describes how the Dalits were treated as unpaid labours. Whenever the Chuhras refused to work without wages, they were punished and sworn at. Neither money nor grain was given for the work that they did. Witnessing the beating of his people in public, the writer ponders: "My mind was filled with a deep revulsion. I was then an adolescent and a scratch appeared on my mind like a line scratched on glass. It remains there still".<sup>11</sup>The humiliation that he suffered at the hands of everyone including his teachers, he says: "The scars that I have received in the name of caste even eons won't suffice to heal them".<sup>12</sup> One of the greatest scars on his mind was the practice of joothan given to his people from the kitchens of the houses that they cleaned. He gives a detailed description of collecting, preserving and eating joothan. Arun Prabha Mukherjee says:

"The word actually carries a lot of historical baggage. Both Ambedkar and Gandhi advised untouchables to stop accepting joothan. Ambedkar an indefatigable documenter of atrocities against Dalits shows how the high caste villagers could not tolerate the fact that Dalits did not want to accept their Joothan anymore and threatened them with violence if any refused it."<sup>13</sup>

Valmiki describes an incident, one of the most impactful in the book, in which there was a marriage feast in the village. His community would gather outside with big baskets in which the dirty pattals or leaf plates were put for the Chuhras to take home. After one such feast Valmiki's mother requested the Brahmin host for some more food for her children, she was very rudely

humiliated and asked to be satisfied with what she had got. Valmiki narrates: "That night the Mother Goddess Durga entered my mother's eyes. It was the first time I saw my mother so angry. She emptied the basket right there. She said to Sukhdev Singh, pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis tomorrow morning." <sup>14</sup>

This and other incidents show that Valmiki's parents were different from others in his community. His father, Chotan Lal, had the courage to stop the practice of 'johar' on his son's suggestion, according to which a newly-wed couple went with the mother-in-law to salaam all the householders where the mother-in-law worked, and were given something as gifts by the Savarna people. Omprakash Valmiki was completely against this tradition so he opposed it at the time of his elder brother's marriage and his father agreed. This johar was a tool of humiliation by upper caste people to break down the self-respect of the newly-weds. They wanted them to beg forever considering themselves always their inferior. In this way, the son was able to awaken the Dalit consciousness of his father.

Education had made the son realize the trap that this practice was associated with, and in which countless generations had fallen into. He also describes the continuation of age-old customs and traditions, rites and rituals as a sort of emotional anchor. Instead of Hindu gods and goddesses, they worshipped deities like Jahapir, Kahva, Mai Madarsan etc. Yet Valmiki was never interested in such rituals and animal sacrifices; in fact, he was frustrated. He could never understand why they were included as Hindus. He questions: "If I were really a Hindu, why would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill me with caste inferiority over the smallest things? I also wondered why one has to be a Hindu in order to be a good human being. I have seen and suffered the cruelty of the Hindus since childhood. Why does the caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak? Why are the Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?" <sup>15</sup> The latter part of the book deals with Valmiki's experience as he moved from his native village to Dehradun, Roorkee, Jabalpur, Bombay and Chandrapur.

Through his extensive reading, Valmiki had come in contact with the best of world literature and Indian literature. Culturally he became an enlightened person much ahead of the other people in his community, and his Dalit consciousness intensified when he came in contact with famous thinkers such as Daya Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Vaman Nimbalkar etc. While in Bombay he met the Kulkarnis whose daughter Savita was attracted to him. The Kulkarnis were Maharashtrian Brahmins and they followed caste discrimination. They were confused because they thought Valmiki was a Brahmin surname. Valmiki decided to clarify the confusion and told Savita the truth about himself. On knowing about his caste, she dropped him immediately. Valmiki describes it: "Suddenly the distance between us had increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our hearts. What a lie culture and civilization are" <sup>16</sup> Later on, his marriage was arranged without his consent. He did not like it and fixed his marriage to Chanda against the wishes of his family.

The final part of his memoir is devoted to the various places where he was posted during his tenure in the Ministry of Defence. He came in contact with Marxism and read writers like Chekov, Turgenev, Hemingway, Zola, and so on. He discovered Marathi Dalit literature which forged his literary consciousness. He began writing poems, plays and short stories, and also a column in a local weekly. After two decades, he brought out *Joothan*. He anticipates the criticism that would be levied against it in the last two paragraphs of the book:

"Times have changed. But there is something somewhere that continues to irk. I have asked many scholars to tell me why Savarnas hate Dalits and Shudras so much. The Hindus who worship trees and plants, beasts and birds, why are they so intolerant of Dalits? 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. The whippers slash your veins like knives. Poverty, illiteracy, broken lives, the pain of standing outside the door, how would the civilized Savarna Hindus know it? Why is my caste my only identity? Many friends hint at the loudness and arrogance of my writings. They insinuate that I have imprisoned myself in a narrow circle. They say that literary expression should be focused on the universal; a writer ought not to limit himself to a narrow, confined terrain of life. That is, my being Dalit and arriving at a point of view according to my environment and my socio-economic situation is being arrogant. Because in their eyes, I am an SC, who stands outside the door".<sup>17</sup>

There can be nothing more effective than Valmiki's own voice, its raw pain, expressing the humiliation and the indignity borne by him all through his growing-up years. The stark truth that jumps out at the reader while reading *Joothan* is the success that the writer has attained in his attempt to once again claim the dignity for himself and for his community. Valmiki's voice reverberates with the raw pain he had felt as a Dalit right from the birth. As he says in the preface to *Joothan*: "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful charred by experiences, experience 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 compassionless towards Dalits".<sup>18</sup>

This struggle has been described so graphically by Valmiki that it becomes a symbol not just for his attempt to gain dignity for himself but for his fellow members of the community that he belongs to. The greatness of the writer lies in the fact that he not only describes the caste prejudices shown by members of the upper castes but he also shows the internal divisions within the depressed classes. The rough and raw experiences narrated by the writer in the text touch a raw nerve in the mind of every reader. There are two themes of universal relevance that pervade *Jaathan* i.e., the Identity and the community. Valmiki's own life story prepares the foundation for the politics of domination and resistance, and the theme of identity is very important as it shows the development of the individual through social and historical experiences. The personal experiences that mould the personality of the individual are applicable to the community as a whole. The sense of writer's identity emerges in a continuous tension between the stereotyped Hindu society and his achievements and evolved mind that he slowly developed with its

challenges and contradictions. All this accounts for the pre-occupation that Dalit authors like Omprakash Valmiki have with identity and community. It was for this purpose that he chose to use 'Valmilu' as his caste name though many in his family including his wife Chanda prefer to use his family's gotra name Khairwal. This name Valmiki signified his Dalit origin as well as an aimed lineage to Valmiki, the great poet of the epic the *Ramayana*. While attending a session at the fifth Jaipur Literary Festival on Outcastes: The Search for Public Conscience', Omprakash Valmiki says being called a Hindu is like abusing to him. He uses Valmiki as his surname and says it is almost a necessity these days. He further points out if one just says Omprakash, it's not enough since people demand a surname as they come from a certain mindset. Caste envelops every aspect of life in India.

There is this continuous sense of struggle to be and to become which connects an individual's identity to that of the community. The autobiography of Valmiki epitomises the struggle of Indian dalits, tribals and others for their rights and social justice. This struggle continues at all levels - cultural, political and economic, and, thereby, books like *Joothan* or *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle become texts of negation. The protagonists are not just passive recipients of all kinds of injustices in our society but they are participants in a kind of resistance. Autobiography has always been a favourite genre of the oppressed because here the story of an individual becomes the life-story of entire people, speaking against the hegemony of those who are in power. It is because of this that the oppressed slaves, women, dalits create narratives based on the past and the present scenario as well as the drives that point towards the future. In this manner, these texts are not just individual efforts but collective projects where the account may be the author's own experiences but it is also a pointer to the oppression and struggle of others as well. That is why many of these works also reiterate on various relationships in an individual's life like mother-son, father-children or brother-sister that are a part of the memories. In *Joothan*, Valmiki shows this side of his life and especially the foundation of his future, and also his desire to go beyond the stereotyped role ascribed to people of his community. His parents sacrificed a lot for their son and stood up for his right to be educated. Again and again Valmiki pays tribute to his parents and recognizes the sacrifices they have made to make him what he is today.

*Joothan* is a highly moving and impressive narrative written by an author who has seen the lowest and worst of life on the social ladder. Valmiki shows how the great epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are used to legitimize the caste rule. Valmiki unsparingly talks of these texts as tools for marginalization. *Joothan* opens the doors to the reality of India, and through an excellent translation by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, it is accessible to the people all over the world, and, thus, bringing the reader in direct touch with the Dalit voice reflecting anger, pain and urgency and places their position within society, culture and history. With great empathy, Mukherjee brings out the experiences and the creative vision of Valmiki, and, thereby, the voice of Valmiki becomes a full-throated cry for basic human dignity for himself and for his community as well. But this does not suffice; the struggle goes on and will continue to do so till

the oppression ceases. The soft-spoken, bespectacled Omprakash Valmiki says that they are creating a new history of India and, therefore, they are creating myths of their own.

*Joothan* comes out as a must-read for everyone. Arun Prabha Mukherjee has done a commendable job in being able to retain the flavour of the original text while using the English idiom and increasing its readability for a worldwide group of avid readers who are moved by this highly impressive autobiography. The book comes out as a strong vehicle for social change but the last word has to be Valmiki's own: "When caste is the basis of respect and merit, important for social superiority, this battle can't be won in a day. We need an ongoing struggle and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change."<sup>19</sup>

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