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Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*: A Journey towards Self-Discovery

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ABSTRACT: Om Prakash Valmiki holds a distinguished place in writing Dalit Literature. Dalit Literature generally refers to the specific category of literature that mainly focuses on the experiences, struggles, and social realities of the Dalit Community. Dalits are individuals who have been oppressed and marginalized for centuries under Indian caste system. The main purpose of Dalit literature is to reveal the sorrows and sufferings of Dalit community and expose the non-Dalits' inhuman treatment towards the former group. Additionally, it also works as an eye-opener for the downtrodden making them realize the true potentials of being human beings. *Joothan* is a heart rendering autobiography of Om Prakash Valmiki. It is a moving tale of the author and his family in particular, and of the whole Dalit community in general. It is the story of a Dalit family in search of dignity and identity in society through constant resistance in various forms. It describes the poor living condition of the Chuhra Community who has to work hard for the upper caste Tyagas who very often ill-treat them and make them work without any pay. As a whole, the author portrays the grim, dark realities of the oppressed class, and the atrocities inflicted on them by the high caste people. The present paper aims at exploring how Dalits suffer at the hands of non-Dalits. This research also focuses on how the autobiographer, facing hunger, discrimination, and extreme humiliation creates his own identity in society with the weapon of education. In other words, this paper centrally concentrates on the author's bitterly painful but successful journey towards his self-discovery.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Oppressed class, Exploitation, Discrimination, Humiliation, Brahmnical Hagemony, Untouchability, Traumatic Experiences, Identity, Self-discovery

INTRODUCTION

Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is a powerful autobiography that sheds light on the harsh realities of a Dalit in India. The book is a scathing critique of caste system that perpetuates discrimination, oppression, suppression and subjugation. It brutally exposes the cruel and inhuman treatment meted out to the Dalits. Indeed, it is a testament to the resilience and strength of the Dalit community, who have faced centuries of oppression and yet continue to fight for their rights.

Prakash Valmiki holds a distinguished place in writing Dalit Literature. He earns widespread fame writing his autobiography *Joothan* (1997) that has attracted the attention of a large number of intellectuals and compelled to think about the most pathetic conditions of his life along with his family and the entire Chuhra community. Besides *Joothan*, he has written three collections of poetry- *Sadiyon Ka Santaap* (1989), *Bas ! Bahut Ho Chuka* (1997) and *Ab Aur Nahi* (2009), He has also written two collections of short stories, *Salaam* (2000) and *Ghuspethiye* (2004). In addition, he has written *Dalit Saahityon Ka Saundaryashastra* (2001) and *History of the Valmiki Community, Safai Devata* (2009).

Valmiki had to face social, psychological and financial challenges since his childhood. He had to struggle with caste prejudice in his school, and college also. He was not allowed to sit in the front benches or with upper class classmates. He was always made to feel debased all the time. In such inhuman condition, he anyhow completed his education. His real transformation has already started with his first encounter of literature written by Premchand, R.N. Tagore and Sharat Chandra in his school library when he was studying in the eighth grade. Through his works, Valmiki has disclosed the problems of Dalit people in general and about himself and his family in particular. He has vividly illustrated caste insult and tyranny. His short stories have also highlighted the various sorts of exploitation of Dalits facing in the caste based Indian society.

Significance of the Study

This study is quite significant as it may encourage future researchers to know how caste system operates in Indian society and how a person just because of his low caste suffers at the hands of the people of high caste. Moreover, it may also help the current as well as future generations especially belonging to subaltern society make up their minds to get education and make careers of their choice to lead a cultured and dignified life in his own society at least.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To find out how badly is caste system rooted in Indian society.
2. To explore systems of caste oppression in Indian society.
3. To analyze the experiences of oppression and humiliation of the protagonist and his family and observe how they register resistance against the oppressive class.
4. To examine how education helps the protagonist to come out of the ill morass of poverty and create identity giving voice to the marginalized class.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does the text critique systems of caste and class oppression in India ?
2. In which stages of his life and in how many ways does the author suffer, face discriminations and meet humiliations just because of his low caste ?
3. How does the narrator and his parents register protest against the privileged class ?
4. How does education bring change in a Dalit's life ?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher adopts qualitative research method in his study. He employs the textual analysis method to interpret and describe the sorrows and sufferings of the Dalit narrator in all stages of his life. The study conducts a close reading of the selected text to analyze conversation the problems in a Dalit's life. The research takes up the narrator and his parents' bitter experiences with the people of the upper caste, and some painful

incidents of their lives as raw data to analyze and interpret their sufferings, and the narrator's mindset of resilience and constant struggles to achieve higher education and job.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher has employed postcolonial theory to analyze the ways in which Dalit literature challenges dominant discourses and power structures. The study has also used the framework of Subaltern Studies in which Dalit literature gives voice to marginalized communities and challenge dominant narratives. Moreover, the researcher has also thrown light from the Marxist perspectives which critique the systems of economic oppression and exploitation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dalit Literature generally refers to specific category of literature that mainly focuses on the experiences, struggles, and social realities of the Dalit Community. The term 'Dalit' originates from Sanskrit 'dala', signifying 'of the soil' or 'rooted in the soil'. In Marathi, it refers to 'dalan' depicting 'being crushed', 'oppressed', or 'broken'. Dalits are individuals who have been oppressed and marginalized for centuries under Indian caste system. The main purpose of Dalit literature is to shed light on the sorrows and sufferings of Dalit community, and challenge social and political structures that perpetuate discrimination on the basis of castes. Indeed, Dalit Literature is a Literature in which Dalits have depicted their pain (Jain: 12). Thus, it aims to awaken Dalit people to live like human beings and raise their voice against the tortures and torments, and oppression and suppression inflicted on them living in society.

There has been a long tradition to question on caste system in India and sensitized towards social discrimination based on caste. Many activists like Phule, Periar and Ambedkar made significant efforts in this direction. Before them many great saints like Namdev, Sant Tukaram, Nanak and Kabir had questioned the Brahmin hegemony and religious restrictions in the temples on the basis of castes. Later many authors like M.R. Anand, Aravind Adiga and Arundhati Roy penned down the miseries and anguish of the low caste, untouchables and their inner quest for freedom and human identity. M. R. Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) proved a land mark in Dalit writing. His other works *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Big Heart* (1945), *The Village* (1939) etc have also highlighted the caste cruelty of the upper cast and their inhuman treatment to the low caste, untouchables. These works have pointed out about the hypocrisy and duality of his upper caste people. Upendra Prasad Singh in his critical book titled *Class Conflicts in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand* (2005) comments:

Pundit Kalinath of *Untouchable* and Mahant Giri of *The Village* are the temples priests who believe that untouchables should be always kept apart...Pundit Kalinath of *Untouchable* who does not allow untouchable to mount up the stage of the well or temple tries to molest Sohini, the sweeper girl. Mahant Nandgiri of *The Village* smokes charas and drinks hemp. He keeps his beautiful women disciples close to have an occasional touch. (Singh 2005:135)

The Dalit authors unlike non-Dalit authors reveal the bitter truths of the people belonging to the Dalit community. Through their literary works- poems, prose pieces and autobiographies, they have been criticizing the cruel caste system, exposing the atrocities done by the upper castes and depicting the experiences and struggles of Dalit individuals. Some autobiographies such as Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2009) Narendra Jadhav's *Outcast: A Memoire* (2003) have attracted to a large number of readers through the vivid portrayal of the pathetic existence and struggle of Dalits. Through

their autobiographies, these writers documented their own narratives as well as of the whole community. They have tried to show the true picture of society through the vivid portrayal of the actual situations of Dalits. They have revealed how they get inhuman treatment by the non-Dalits. Even today, the sufferings of such marginalized people have not come to an end. Valmiki, the author of *Joothan* has rightly noted in his preface:

Dalit Life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionless towards Dalits. (Valmiki 2003: vii)

In Dalit literature, Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* occupies the most significant place. The book was first written in Hindi in 1997 and later translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukharjee in 2003. The English version of the book titled *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* attracted to a large number of readers across the globe and the saga of Dalits' intense sorrows and sufferings including social isolation and utter humiliation, their struggles for existence and emancipation reached to the entire world. The author exposed the rigidity of the caste system in Indian society, the sole responsible factor for socio-economic oppression prevalent in Indian society. Valmiki writes:

'Caste' is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, 'caste' determines his identity. Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country's great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into? (133-34).

ANALYSIS

Joothan: A Dalit's Life is an autobiographical account of Valmiki. The author writes about his dwelling place, his home town 'Barla', his birth in Chuhra community, his family's poverty, his struggle for his education, his physical and psychological harassment, his job and his social activities for awakening of the Dalit community in sufficient detail. This book describes the poor living condition of the Chuhra Community. Their dwelling place lacks basic civil amenities and sanitation facilities. Their lives are just like pigs in dust and mud. They have to work hard for the upper caste Tyagas who very often ill-treat them and make them to work without any pay:

We would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse the unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead, we got sworn at and abused. (2).

Such physical and economic oppressions lead the Chuhra community to extreme poverty and hunger. The autobiographer shares his own experience and of his community. "After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan i.e. leftover food which "was eaten with lots of relish." (9) ... "And yet no one had any grudges, or shame, or repentance" (10)

The author's life journey came across several such pathetic incidents that impacted his whole life ahead. But the most traumatic experiences he shared about his mother's reactions when she was humiliated by Sukhdev Singh Chaudhary, a rich man from upper caste. The occasion was the marriage ceremony in the house of this rich man. Valmiki's mother along with his younger sister Maya was waiting outside the door after all baraties finished their meal and left the place. She went to the rich man and requested him, "Chaudhary ji, all of your guests have eaten and gone....Please put something on the pattal for my children. They too have waited for this day."(10). Then Sukhdev Singh Pointed at the basket full of dirty pattals and said, "You are taking a basketful Joothan. 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.”(11). Valmiki’s mother turned furious and rebelliously put down the basket full of joothan and overthrew it in front of Chaudhary’s face and blurted, “Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baraties tomorrow morning.”(11). Sukhdev Singh tried to hit her, but she confronted him very boldly. She was looking like a fierce lioness. Since that day Valmiki’s mother has never accepted any joothan from any rich, upper class houses. The author also advised his community not to do so. This incident shook the author’s conscience very badly and the seeds of rebellion had been sown in his psyche. He started questioning his caste and economic status in society. It also might have led him to quest for his true identity through self-awareness and education.

The author traces the journey of a Dalit family from ‘ignorance to knowledge, and from poverty to prosperity’. In this transformation education plays a key role, but taking education and passing out with a degree was not easy for him. He had to face a lot of difficulties in getting admission in school. In the school he had to bear much torments and tortures not only from his classmates but also from the teachers not because of his misbehaviour but just because of his low caste. He was forced to sweep the floor of the classes. He was not allowed to drink water from the hand pump. He says, “During the examination we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from high up, lest our hands touch the glass.”(16) Such discrimination and ill treatment the author faced several times. He remains shocked to know that he gets failed in the exam due to very less marks in Chemistry. He writes: “Not only did I do poorly in 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.”(65) The fact is that he had complained against the Chemistry teacher, Brajpal Singh for his prejudiced attitude towards him. The principal had assured him that he would discuss with the teacher and things would be clear to him, but what happened was just the opposite. During the whole year he was kept out of the experiments in Chemistry. However, he had good marks in all the subjects except Chemistry. He concluded that he had become prey to caste prejudices against Dalits. He came to know the role of caste in doing good in studies. This incident made him so pessimistic that he decided to leave the village and went to Dehradun for his further study but there also he had to face such caste discrimination. The principal of D.A.V College, Dehradun refused to give him admission when he saw his caste certificate, but after requesting him persistently for several days, he got his admission. Here he is again humiliated for his low caste, but his experiences have made him immune to bear such ghastly, inhuman acts. His matured, tolerant attitude helped him overcome all the difficulties and obstacles. He now learnt to bear all the troubles silently without losing the balance of his mind, but at the same time he remained focused on getting education and achieving economic self-dependence. He recalls, “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.” (3) Apart from, his experience about some of the teachers had been very shocking and shameful. Such inhuman beastly nature of such teachers had adversely affected the psyche of the author. About some of them he presents the memoir in his autobiography:

The ideal image of the teachers that I saw in my childhood has remained indelibly imprinted on my memory. Whenever someone starts talking about a great guru, I remember all those teachers who used to swear about mothers and sisters. They used to fondle good-looking boys and invite them to their homes and sexually abuse them. (4)

In the journey of the author’s self-discovery, his father plays an important role. His father though illiterate supported him to get education. He used to say, “You have to improve the caste by studying.” (29) Thus, his father always motivated him to achieve educational height; he also inculcated in him the spirit of excellence. Inspired by his father, he embarked on a journey of education to shape his destiny. Like Valmiki’s father, Balram’s father too, in Aravind Adiga’s debut, Booker Prize winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008) had a

dream to see his son educated and live like a man, “ My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine at least one- should live like a man.” (Adiga 2009:30) Though he was illiterate and a rickshaw puller, he knew the importance of education in life.

Valmiki bears the precious words of his father and despite all the hardships and humiliation, gets through the high school examination with flying colours which became the matter of pride for the whole ‘basti’. His real transformation started when he got admission in DAV Inter College, Dehradun. He got the chance to read literature written by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. He became shocked and surprised to learn his struggle throughout his life. Indeed such literature inflamed his anger towards the hegemonic forces and at the same time, it infused in him self-confidence and self-esteem. He became more rebellious and more articulate against the caste system especially, the diseases of untouchability of Indian society. He shares his experience about the Ambedkar literature:

“Dr. Ambedkar’s life long struggle had shaken me up....I proceeded to read all of Ambedkar’s books that I found in library... the restlessness inside me had increased. My stone like silence had suddenly begun to melt...A new word, ‘Dalit’, entered my vocabulary, a word that is not a substitute for ‘Harijan’, but an expression of rage of millions of untouchables... the deeper I was getting into this literature the more articulate my rage became....It was this literature that had given me courage. (72-73)

Living in Dehradun, he had to suffer a lot due to his low caste. His period of distress got lessened when he got a job in the Ordinance factory. After a year’s training, he was further selected for the training in Jabalpur where he came in contact with Marxist ideals. He studied Gorky’s novel *Mother* and Anton Chekhov’s brilliant short stories which inspired him to write poems, short stories and one act plays. He also staged the plays and in some of them he himself acted also. Later he founded his own theatre group- Meghdoot Natya Samstha. Under his leadership this platform earned a big name for its main agenda of Dalit awareness.

When the author moved to Bombay, he remained stunned to see the so called advanced, educated people who had very low opinion towards low caste people. The problem of untouchability also existed there. The hatred of non-Dalits was very often seen in their inhuman behaviour towards the Dalits. Even after getting education and a good job and maintaining cleanliness in his personality and appearance, he could not uplift his social status in society. He recalls his father who would often say one can improve his caste by getting education. But even after getting education and job he does not feel so. He says:

He (the narrator’s father) did not know that ‘caste’ cannot be improved by education. It can only be improved by taking birth in the right caste. (58).

CONCLUSION

In his autobiography *Joothan*, the author criticizes the Indian society for social discrimination on basis of caste. The caste is seen as ubiquitous in Indian history and it is also posed as a threat to Indian modernity. The author further mentions: “One can somehow get past poverty and derivation but it is impossible to get caste.”(18). His declaration is that the oppressed and the humiliated can empower themselves by taking education and being united to fight against caste cruelty, subjugation, slavery and domination. The author could transform himself through the sharp weapon of education, self-confidence, courage, self-esteem and rebellious attitude. Of course, his autobiography, *Joothan* presents his extremely painful but successful journey of his self-discovery.

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