

Towards Dalit Literature: A study of Joothan by Om Prakash Valmiky

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Abstract

Dalit literature has been a major struggle against caste-based oppression and discrimination. It not only negotiates a collective identity for Dalits but also introduces variability in negotiations for the same. It identifies the ruptures and the transitional processes in Valmiki's life. These processes of transitions include identity redefinition, knowledge and skills; and meaning making. These processes were facilitated by varied resources: social, cognitive and symbolic. Valmiki's relocation to a city led to the change in his frame of activity. Thereafter, at each stage of his life, his social circle widened, his cognitive skills got enhanced and symbolic resources were used at progressively higher level of reflexivity. The major social resources were found to be the people with whom he came in contact after relocating to the city. The cognitive resources were found to be Hindi mainstream literature, Marathi Dalit literature, and theatrical devices. The symbolic resources were the works of Phule, Ambedkar. Accessibility and utilization of all these resources eased the reconfiguration of the semiotic prism reifying his identity as a Hindi Dalit writer enabling him transform the caste-based experiences on the plane of fiction challenging the power hierarchy embedded in social reality.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit, untouchable, discrimination

Introduction

In India, Dalit is a group of people who are historically acknowledged as untouchables, separated from rest of the society by the caste system. The term Dalit has been derived from Sanskrit word 'dal', which means cracked, downtrodden, suppressed, underprivileged, broken, crushed and destroyed. It is Hindi and Marathi translation of depressed class and was used in 1930s. During Dalit panther movement in 1970 in Maharashtra this word was invigorated. In the 19th century Marathi social reformer and revolutionary Mahatma Jyotiba Phule used this term to describe outcastes and untouchables as oppressed, broken and victims of Indian caste society. B. R. Ambedkar used 'broken people' for Dalits in *The Untouchables*.

The word Dalit generally refers to the people who were once known as 'untouchables'. Dalits are known with different nomenclature in different parts of the nation such as Outcastes, Exterior-castes, Depressed Classes, Untouchables, Ex-Untouchables, Padadalit, Chandals, Avarna etc. Dalits were never comfortable with such identities and thus, they opposed these fabricated social identities and the term Dalit is an outcome of these protests.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, a novel account of his birth and upbringing as an untouchable, or Dalit, in the newly independent India of the 1950s. This book is considered as one of the first portrayals of Dalit life in north India. Omprakash Valmiki rose to great heights through his writings. Omprakash lost his battle for life because of liver cancer at the age of 63 on 17th of November 2013, at Dehradun, Uttarakhand.

Discussion

He will always be remembered by those who knew him not just as a literary pioneer, but as a fine human being. He succeeded in providing the Dalit writing in Hindi with a firm foundation. "*Joothan*" literally means scraps of food left on the plate, destined for the garbage or for the family pet in a middle-class urban home. It is related to *jootha* which means polluted and such scraps are penned as "*Joothan*" only if lower caste people eat them. The word captured the pain, humiliation, and poverty of this community, which has been living at the bottom of India's social pyramid for hundreds

of years. Although untouchability is legally abolished after independence, Dalits continue to economic inequality, face discrimination, violence and ridiculed.

Omprakash Valmiki has set new ground in his novel in which he tells stories about the life of the *Chuhra* caste at the bottom rung of Indian society, hitherto unrepresented in literature by high-caste writers, and recounts his struggle to overcome physical and mental exploitation through education as advocated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the leading Dalit intellectual. Although written in Hindi, Valmiki's novel uses the social dialect of the Dalit to describe the degradation of their daily activities. Consequently, in addition to the challenges of translating into the language of power, heightened in this case by the publication of the translation in both Delhi and New York, *Joothan* presents problem for the translator in rendering the socially marked differences between the levels of Hindi in English where the Dalit words have no equivalent. Again, it is less the communicative function of language which is at stake in these translations than the politics of language. Both translations have had a significant impact not only in transforming the field of Indian literature, as evidenced in the granting of the New India Foundation Best Book Award (2004) to *Joothan* and the reviews and seminars discussing Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, but also in reorienting the parameters of postcolonial literary studies which had previously focused exclusively on works by high-caste Indian writers.

A clear reading of *Joothan* would get us to a realization that the Dalits live in a viciously terrible condition in terms of caste-ism and wretched in terms of poverty. Omprakash's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2007) is a journey; a journey, that cut across all-around deficiency of the Dalits to their rights. To gain the right to education, right to land, right to live, right to property and most importantly their right to dignity. An overall fear of being enclosed in Hindu Caste system makes the Dalits feel lower than the animals. Caste is a one way system which is entered by birth and exit only by death. Omprakash Valmiki has spanned the journey of *Joothan* from the darkest days of 1950s to the mellowing phase of Dalits and Dalit literature of 1990s. *Joothan* registers the encounter with sociopolitical, religious and cultural complications faced by the Dalits to become a Dalit to the Dalits. Omprakash's Memoir has registered a Dalit life world which was far distant in space and time from the modern day organized movements waged by the Dalits of today. It is an unknown world within our own known world where children are reared up with cattle, women raped, men-used and thrown away. Whatever they do, where ever they go the invisible stigma of "untouchability" smears each and every Dalit.

Traditionally, Indian literatures have either ignored untouchables or portrayed them as victims in need of savior, as objects without voice or agency. He gives the account of his caste of *Chuhra* , at the bottom rung of society; his heroic struggle to survive the predetermined life of unending physical and mental harassment; the cruel obstacles he overcame to became the first high school graduate of his neighborhood; his coming to consciousness under the influence of the great Dalit political leader Dr. B.R.Ambedkar; and his transformation to a speaking subject bearing witness to the oppression and exploitation that he endured as an individual and as a member of a stigmatized and oppressed community.

He had very bad experiences of his life. That's why he thought that his experience should be read by the general masses. That's why he has written all of his bad experiences in his novel so that other people also know that there are still many people who sleep hungry daily or they are forced to eat '*Joothan*'. One of the most powerful moments of the text is Valmiki's mother's overturning of the basketful of *Joothan* after she is humiliated by Sukhdev Singh Tyagi. Her act of defiance sows the seeds of rebellion in the child Valmiki .

He dedicated the text to his father and mother, both portrayed as heroic figures, which desired something better for their child and fought for his safety and growth with tremendous courage. His father's ambitions for his son are evident in the nickname, Munshiji, that he gives Valmiki. The child

Valmiki rises on their shoulders to become the first high school graduate from his *basti* he pays his debt by giving voice to the indignities suffered by them and other Dalits.

Joothan is significant in the sense that it is a reminder for the government to act efficiently to uplift the suppressed Dalit community. The provisions and measures provided by the government seem inadequate. The atrocities and exploitation experienced by Dalit community are unsolved even in this era of liberalization and globalization. In *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, Valmiki questions the relevance of caste system and exposes it as a sword pointing towards the untouchables. By giving the title, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, for his novel, Valmiki proclaims his intention to represent the life of untouchable through his life story. The term '*Joothan*' symbolizes the hardships suffered by the low caste people of India for centuries of alienation and isolation.

Thus Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is about the journey of a Dalit family struggling for education and status in society. It presents the story of a Dalit family in search of dignity and identity. It depicts the oppressive and exploitative village life as well as the success of the author in completing his education and earning a name as a writer of stories based on Dalit life. The central narrative follows the transformation of the family.

Here it is observed the hollowness of caste system hospitality. Valmiki points out that to receive hospitality one should belong to the upper caste. Such is the plight of the low caste, Dalits. *Joothan*, then, is a multivalent, healing the fractured self through narrating, contributing to the documentation of Dalit history, opening a dialogue with the silencing oppressors, and providing solace as well as frank criticism to his own people. For the fact that Valmiki has become a speaking subject indicates that Indian democracy has opened some escape hatches through which a critical mass of articulate, educated Dalits has emerged. On the other hand, the harsh realities that he portrays so powerfully underscore the fact that the promises made in the Constitution of independent India have not yet been fully met.

Joothan is a book that voices the demand of the Dalits for their rightful place under the sun. Resolving the problems of Dalit identity is an immensely difficult task. It appears that only through the forging of alliances with oppressed communities elsewhere in the world on the basis of human rights can some change be brought about. Despite the challenges, the forging of a Dalit identity is of great importance. The fact remains that Dalits still endure discrimination of different kinds; they are still poorer, have less access to education and less hope of a bright future than the privileged castes. Dalit literary theory has emerged as a reaction to dominant group critic's negative evaluations of Dalit writing. From a Dalit perspective, it offers a distinct formulation of the nature and purpose of literature in general, an evaluation of the canon of Indian literatures, and framework within which Dalit writing should be read and evaluated. Valmiki has travelled from illiteracy to literacy and from the village to the city.

Dalit novel construct the human society on the basis of humanity. If anyone accepts Dalit literature it is the construction of human relations. Dalit novel provide a record of the lowest sections of India's population. This literature has breathed a new life into the emotional world of Dalit community because it has blossomed to provide expression and meaning to the life of a set of people who had been undergoing severe oppression and isolation for many years. This new literature started questioning the atrocities and injustice inflicted upon the Dalit's life. Dalit novels are realistic depictions of the life of torment and anguish experienced by the untouchables. The pain, intense suffering, and sense of isolation revealed through Dalit novel's are very disturbing.

However, the novel also questions the effort of the constitution to provide quality to all irrespective of their caste. For, in a caste- ridden society, nearly seventy years after the constitution came into effect, Dalits are even now not allowed to enter temples or fetch water from the common taps or wells in certain areas. Even today, the average Indian first asks the caste of any person he meets for the first time and only then opens up to the next level. In marriages and love a lot of importance is attached to the caste. Sometimes people from the Dalit clans resort to masking their identities by

changing surnames to be accepted in the society. Sometime they convert to other religion which provides them an equal status. They may have faced the odds and emerged successful in their attempt to educate themselves and earned a decent living but they still remain the people stand outside the door; for as soon as their caste is revealed, people quickly withdraw from them.

The suppressed voice of a Dalit's life is well presented in *Joothan*. What makes this work unique is its keen observation and detailed description of the oppression and atrocities faced by Dalits in this world conditioned by the caste laws. The success of *Joothan* is a symbol of the development of the Dalit community. Valmiki knows that the best way of expressing the conditions and situation of Dalit community is through narrating his own experiences as a Dalit. Novel has the power to inspire the readers and in that sense Valmiki's novel can be the source of inspiration for young generation of Dalit community to attain success in their lives, disregarding their limitations. By narrating his own successful life, Valmiki asserts that the lack of opportunities faced by the Dalit community cannot be the solid reason that obstructs them from paving their own way in this indifferent world.

In the present world, where Dalits are still treated as outcastes, this work by Omprakash Valmiki gets great significance since it conveys a message to the Dalit community to fight against these deprivations and to make their voice heard and reverberate throughout the world. The identity of the novel emerges in a continuous sense of tension between the stereotyped caste Hindu society and the achievements and evolved mind that he slowly developed with its challenges .

CONCLUSIONS

It has been observed that the text *Joothan*, reveals to the reader the rigidity and narrow-mindedness of caste-ist India, which is as relevant today as it was in the early part of the last century. The author's objective doesn't stop at evoking compassion towards the oppressed Dalits in the mind of the reader but questions "why is my caste my only identity"? This one query leads the reader into introspection.

Valmiki has taken pride to share some of the most specific issues, which are silenced for a long time. He feels that though the times have been changed, somewhere or something still persists to bother him. By nature Dalit in the case of Valmiki it is quite opposite, he is able to reach the real caste existing world by raising his voice on behalf of his community through the novels. Valmiki's love towards writing literature gave him strength to raise his voice against prejudices and unfairness. It is in fact has to be accepted that no longer Dalit's are considered to be subjugated. Presently, the repetitive investigation on the Dalit literature has helped the Dalits to come up in society.

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