

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*: A Dalit's life as a Dalit literary text

Vinod Kumar

Assistant Professor of English, M.M. (P.G.) College Fatehabad, Haryana, India

Abstract

Every human being must find liberty, honour and security from *intimidation* by the powerful elements of society. These values are now articulated in a particular type of literature- its name being Dalit Literature which appeared in the 1960 starting with the Marathi language, is precisely a literature that artistically portrays the sorrow, tribulation, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. With the passage of time it appeared in Hindi, Kanada, Telgu, Bangla, and Tamil languages. In this way Dalit literature recognizing the centrality of humanity, is a lofty image of the joys and sorrows of human being. In short Dalit literature is a literature written by the Dalits who are oppressed by the Indian caste-system. Omprakash, a pioneer in Dalit writing in Hindi, saw dalit literature as a vital part of the struggle for social justice. His autobiography *Joothan* which first published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English in 2003 is a memoir of his painful experiences at a village near Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh, in an untouchable caste *Chuhra* well before the defiant term 'Dalit' was coined. Valmiki's story is one his terrible experiences. It articulates him as a freer being in a society that remains compassionless towards Dalits.

Keywords: Dalit, subaltern, Joothan, marginalization, untouchability and oppression

Introduction

Dalit literature is the literature of the untouchables. It is a campaign against all forms of marginalization based on class, race, caste, or creed. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, as the title suggests is an autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki's life as a Dalit. In his preface to the Hindi Edition of the book, Valmiki himself has remarked the chief concern behind writing the autobiography. According to him, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations" (vii). The high caste Indian writers presented Dalits as 'mute' and pathetic characters who are not able to act or speak about their oppression. Through this book Valmiki proves that the Dalit or the subaltern can also speak. The autobiography, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* becomes a landmark in the history of Dalit literature. Thus, the paper is a sincere attempt to present Valmiki's endeavor in voicing the trials and tribulations experienced by the marginalized Dalit Community of India even after Independence.

'Dalit' is the term used to describe the nearly one hundred and eighty million Indians who were placed at the bottom of the traditional caste system. In recent years, an animated field of Dalit literature has risen in India, and some of these works are beginning to be translated into English. So Dalit literature is studied with a view to incorporate it into the main stream Indian literature as it articulates the consciousness of the historically suppressed people.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is the most appropriate example for a Dalit literary text. On the surface level this book seems to be an autobiographical account of Valmiki's journey from his birth and upbringing as an untouchable in the newly independent India of the fifties to his present as a Dalit writer. But at the deeper level it is not only the personal story of Valmiki's own life but of all those subalterns who are not in the main stream of the society. So *Joothan* articulates those painful experiences which could not find a place in literary representations. Experiences like

Valmiki's own such as his birth, growing up in the untouchable caste *Chuhra* and his heroic struggle to survive this preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution and his transformation into a speaking subject and recorder of the oppression and exploitation as he endured, not only as an individual but also as a member of a marginalized community which was never appeared in annals of Hindi literature. The 'Chuhras' worked for the *Tagas*, an upper class people who ill-treated the 'chuhras' in a number of ways, Untouchability was one social evil which the writer confronted as he grew up. He says: "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" (*Joothan* 2).

Therefore Valmiki has paved a new ground to articulate the painful experiences of dalits.

As far as the title of this book is concerned then it seems to prove the truth of Dangle's claim that Dalit writing demands a new dictionary, for those words which are used by it. These words are also described as new as the objects, situations and activities. The hindi word 'joothan' literally means food left on eater's plate, usually destined for garbage pail in middle class, urban home. On other words, such food is also called 'joothan' if someone else besides the original eater were to eat it. Thus the word carries connotations of ritual purity and pollution as 'jootha' means polluted. But English words such as 'leftovers' or 'leavings' are not able to express substitute for 'joothan'. In English it means food remaining in the pot that can be eaten at the next meal. But title articulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community which not only had to rely on joothan but also relished it. Valmiki gives us a vivid account of collecting, preserving and eating joothan. In this way the term carries a lot of historic baggage. Both Ambedkar and Gandhi advised untouchable to stop collecting joothan.

Therefore it is not surprising that one of the most powerful

moments of the text is Valmiki's mother's overturning of basketful of joothan when she is humiliated by Sukhdev Singh Tyagi. It is also only because of her act of defiance that Valmiki was able to rebel against those of atrocities. So this text is also dedicated to his mother and his father who are presented as heroic figures and are desired something better for their child. Valmiki's father ambitions for his son are evident in the nickname, Munshiji, that he gives Valmiki. The child Valmiki also rises on their shoulders to become the first high school graduate from his basti. Valmiki's writing of these moments of profound violation of his and his people's human rights is extremely powerful and deeply disturbing.

Valmiki goes on to present the hardships that he had to face in the educational institutions. The upper caste boys used to tease the writer in every possible way. They used to laugh at his clothes, which were nothing but rags. Even the teachers and the headmaster were not different in this context. The Chuhras were always entrusted with the task of sweeping the homes and public places. It was considered as their duty. Hence the headmaster of the school asked the writer to sweep the school. The Dalit people felt that it was a waste of time to get their children educated. When the writer's father asked his fellow Dalits to send their children to school, they blatantly refused it. According to them: "What is the point of sending him to school? When has a crow become a swan?"(6).

Right from the early stages of his life, the writer was conscious of the importance of studies. Reading and writing made the writer an enlightened being. He began to read voraciously. His results raised his self-confidence. He was selected as the class leader after the examination and his seat was moved from the back of the class to the front. Though some teachers behaved in an unfriendly manner, the writer loved going to school. This was because most of the students and a majority of teachers belonged to the Tyagi community. The writer talks about the discrimination they had to face in the school at different points in his autobiography.

The social problems faced by the *chuhras* haunted Valmiki's mind since his childhood right up to his adulthood. As a child, the writer always wished to go to school in neat ironed clothes. But the dhobi refused to wash clothes for a low caste *Chuhra* boy. While talking about his memories in school, the writer talks about a number of teachers who encouraged him and also about the ones who ill treated him. When he reached the tenth standard, he was determined to study well in order to get good marks which would provide him an opportunity to study in a college. But on the eve of his mathematics examination he was made to do forced manual labour. He spent one whole day sowing cane under the instructions of a Tyagi. He felt humiliated and tortured. The writer also narrates the tragic circumstances under which he wrote the board exams. There was no electricity and hence they depended on lanterns and oil lamps. In spite of all the hardships, Valmiki passed the high school examination with good marks. It was the first time that someone from the *Chuhra* community passed the examination. It was indeed a time for celebration in the whole *basti*.

After passing the board examination, Valmiki went on to study further. He took science as optional subject. But even at this stage, his low birth became the butt of ridicule. He talks about a teacher named Omdatta Tyagi, a caste minded teacher who insulted students based on their caste. Through this episode, the writer makes it very clear that education had not

changed the degenerated mindset of the people. When he reached class twelve, new problems began to crop up and this time it was in the form of a chemistry teacher named Brajpal. He dashed all his hopes of securing good marks in the examination. This caste minded teacher didn't like the idea of an 'untouchable' studying in the school. When the results were announced, the writer's name featured in the list of failures. He had secured good marks in all other subjects, but had failed in the lab test of the chemistry paper. Valmiki and other Dalit writerd break through the wall of silence and denial behind which his various school teachers show how Dalit children are abused verbally, physically and publically without any reason.

Furthermore, Valmiki presents his and his fellow beings with upper class teachers in the context of Brahmin teacher Dronacharya tricking his low caste disciple Eklavya into cutting his thumb and presenting it to him as a part of *gurudakshina* or teacher's tribute. When Valmiki' father go to the school then he calls the headmaster a Dronacharya. While the education system is indicted as death dealing for Dalits, Valmiki pays tribute to the Dalit organic intellectuals who help to nurture the growth of Dalit consciousness in him. Omprakash Valmiki also provides the pictures of penury from a closer quarter. He tells that in his village *pattals* (plates made of leaves) were generally used in the marriages to eat food. The *pattals* were thrown in the dustbins when all the people had eaten the food. The *Chuhras* of this caste had to collect the left-over food from the *pattals* so that they may take it in their homes for their members of families.

While describing the events in Bombay much later in his life, Valmiki highlights the fact that education is not the solution to the ills of the caste system. On having been mistaken for a Brahmin because of his adopted last name, "Valmiki" (used to denote a community of untouchables in Uttar Pradesh) he found out that just the revelation of his real caste to well-educated middle class people was received by shock and a sudden change of attitude towards him. Even his own relatives were hesitant to invite him for a wedding as he refused to let go of his last name because it would reveal their caste. Omprakash Valmiki constantly stresses on the differences between the Dalits and the caste Hindus, the Savarnas, with respect to their various religious beliefs and customs, he subtly contests the belief that the oppression of the Dalits by the Savarnas is justified as per the Hindu religious laws because the pork-eating Dalits living on the outskirts of villages and towns actually do not belong to the Hindu religion.

Inspired by the works of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for the socio-economic development of the Dalits and the abolition of untouchability, Omprakash Valmiki made an immense contribution to Dalit literature by highlighting the plight of Dalits in the post-independence era which isn't quite different from that of the pre-independence era, Joothan being one of the first contributions to Dalit literature. Valmiki also participated in plays, being actively supported by wife, Chanda. The text, *Joothan*, reveals to the reader the rigidity and narrow-mindedness of casteist 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. In India caste has

always defined the socio-political scenario of the country. Whether it is the debate on the reservation policy for government jobs and education to aid the socially and economically backward classes or political gimmickry, everything has an undertone of caste and religion. Valmiki also writes that despite government undertaking for the development of oppressed classes, through reservations, their achievements are hardly noticed and are ridiculed often. Many of us, at some stage of our lives have been discriminated against because we belong to a community and due to our beliefs and practices. The mention of Caste, Community, and Religion on admission forms to school and colleges is one such example. Just being an Indian is rather insufficient to get our basic rights. Isn't it ironical that with every step our country takes towards "development", the same issues crop up again and again? To sum up, the book, *Joothan – A Dalit's Life*, is an exceptional piece of literary work. As a self-conscious Dalit literary text, *Joothan* makes a powerful statement against the oppressive caste system still prevalent in most parts of India. Valmiki's use of autobiography helps him to occupy a vantage subject position from which he presents a Dalit's lived experience. The 'true to life' format of the autobiography helps him to lay bare the brutality inherent in the caste system, which consequently becomes a powerful argument in favour of dismantling this undesirable form of social organization. At the same time, Valmiki's own struggles and success, acts as motivation for others to struggle and achieve their goals. Thus, *Joothan* symbolizes the struggle for dignity and human rights and demonstrates that a revolutionary transformation of society is not just desirable but possible as well.

References

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