

**OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S JOOTHAN: AN UNTOUCHABLE'S
NARRATIVE OF AN UNTOUCHABLE'S LIFE THROUGH
TRANSLATION**

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ABSTRACT

Translation is a mode to express one's ideas or views before others who are unknown to one's language. India being a multi-linguistic land, the form of translation plays a more significant role here. Across the whole world, people use of the most common and popular form of creating literature and disseminating one's ideas. However, several times the sensibility is lost in translation yet the translation is of great utility in perspective of knowing others' cultures and social prevalence. There have been many works in translation which have maintained the heights of true literature. They have become ideal creations to be inspired. The original works of well acclaimed writers such as Bama, Asokamitran, Girish Karnad etc. have also been translated and became masterpieces through the translation versions of their original writings through which people have come to know about the different dimensions of India. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is also one of such works which was originally written in Hindi but later on translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee due to which people around the world became acquainted with Dalit sensibility and their existence in Indian society.

Key Words: Translation, Untouchability, Marginalisation, Dalit sensibility,

Language has been one of the most powerful instruments of the human to move ahead. It was not merely a way to speak to others but was tool which isolated man from the other species of the earth, bringing a unity and integrity among human beings in order to prevent themselves from being hunted by other creatures and forming a development wheel for themselves. It is translation which carries any view or idea of a society to other societies. Today when we are in a world of globalization and we want to establish human brotherhood and integrity among all the

countries of the world the translation becomes the way to our aim of universal unity as it brings an emotional integration and cultural transformation with the social development of the society. Language forms part of a culture which is the social representation of a country. A common language or a universal way of expression among nations create a mutual understanding among nations yet, this understanding is the result of different translations made for that universal language or cultural. So there are prospects also take place in translation as it flourishes economy, social harmony, cultural transformation and human development. Any translated work which catches the sensibility of the mass of the other place creates a social understanding and mental development of the readers. It also benefits the society of the translated works as it brings out the issues and psychological perspective of the people. Literature has a medium of expression of one's ideology or learning of the society. So anything told through the way of literature is the result or perception of the noticed thing of that society.

The problem with the translation is that it loses sensibility many times while conveying the meaning or message. Consequently the readers remain untouched with the actual encounter with the situation and circumstances of the described people and places. It may diminish the aesthetic sense of the original (written document) writing too and actual reason of translating the works remains unfulfilled. Therefore, translation needs a lot of accuracy and sensibility of the written piece. The translator must know what she or he is writing and what her or his purpose of writing. Any flaw in the clearance of conception should not take place otherwise it will cause huge loss of sensibility in that work. However, every work is an effort to carry the things from one place to another pace and to the extent it reaches to the other audience, the translation is successful to that extent. So the work of translation is an assiduous task with the great prospects of conveying the ideas. Different people take it different way but the progress of literature always becomes possible through these translated works.

Through the works of translations many times the social issues have been raised in the society. Different social situations have been discussed and portrayed in these works which reflect the condition of societies and human beings. In these works several times the problem of casteism has also been illustrated which shows the prospects of translation in literature. Casteism is one of those factors which affect a human being in a great deal. When a person takes birth in a lower class, his or her life comes into the margin naturally because the people of lower class have been in the margin for a long time. They have to struggle hard to acquire anything. They face a secondary or inferior treatment from the people and exploited by other people for their own benefits. In his book *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki also discusses about the disparity faced by Dalits:

Caste' is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, 'caste' determines his or her destiny. 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? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom (134-135).

The name 'Untouchable' always brings to our mind Mulk Raj Anand's first novel. But Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is written from the individual experiences of Dalit who rises to distinction from his marginalized presence. Omprakash Valmiki's voice is today recognized as

an authorized voice of an author who works on behalf of Dalits. He was born in a frantically poor family in North India, the lowest caste in Indian society, a community of the uneducated Untouchables. He describes from his individual experiences the turmoil of the Dalits who even have no right to fight for education or food. He describes how these people are subject to an institutionalized slavery. The highest purpose of Dalit writing is not beauty of craft, but authenticity of experience. Omprakash gives us an anatomy of oppression. Most significantly, though, Valmiki's story is a voice from the half of India that has been voiceless for countless generations. Valmiki and a few others like him have breached an opening for our understanding and knowledge about a people so marginalized that they disappeared from the world's awareness, their cultures, lifestyles, folk knowledge, and aspirations represented nowhere in mainstream or scholarly sources. *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki is one such work of Dalit literature, first published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, a professor of English at York University in Canada and did a great job by making the work available to a wider audience. She has illuminated the book with her thoughtful and insightful foreword. Dalits today constitute about one sixth of India's population. Spread over the entire country, speaking many languages, and belonging to many religions, they have become a major political force. Education plays an integral part in the development of a country and it is regarded as a fundamental right of the people. No one can dispute that denial of education based on caste or any form of casteism is a serious violation of human rights. And in the Indian context, it is a flagrant violation of the Constitutional guarantee of equality. But in practical terms, the violation of this declaration has been clearly seen in matters concerning dalits. Very often, dalits are excluded from the field of education because of the hegemonic class impression that they are destined to do menial jobs. Valmiki ruminates over the grievous episodes of his school days and unfolds it in his autobiography. In school he was prohibited from sitting along with his upper class companions. He was forced to sit on the dirty ground aloof from the upper class lads. In another episode, he talks of being dragged out of his studies by a high caste landlord to do unpaid labour. He was also excluded from extra-curricular in the academy. He writes:

I was kept out of extra-curricular activities. On such occasions I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendents of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door (16).

Author's discussion on culture and heritage of the country turns the views of all in the scriptures which have been followed by the Indian society since the time immemorial:

The origin of caste system belongs to the age of the Rigveda. The caste system became well established when birth became the foundation of caste rank in social stratification. Slowly, many restrictions were imposed on marriage and social relations. The four varnas were interrelated by two primary principles namely division of labour and synthesis. A plethora of sub castes and mixed castes rose with the invention of new crafts and jobs. The occupational differentiation diversified the caste system (Selvem 10).

As the society advanced with new inventions and new tendencies, the mainstream people got educated and became more progressive and developed. But this advancement of the world has not brought any mentionable change in this life of Dalits and they were left behind in a corner living with struggle and suppression. Their relentless struggle has been portrayed by the writers time to time and as a result they are getting cognition and entity in the society where they had,

“The suffering undergone by the depressed class went unnoticed until recently as the writers and artist hardly captured the indignities and inhumanistic suffered by the untouchables or Dalit. Perhaps they could portray with poignancy and finesse the suffering of human being placed in adverse and inhospitable circumstances but they could not capture in their writings the anguish born of the unjust social system based on caste and class iniquities.” (Singh 121).

This is because of translation, which made Dalit’s voice heard all over the world. India being a land of different religions, castes, races, creeds, tribes and clans, has been a land of diversity. Due to this diversity people differ in their living styles also. There has been a system of social hierarchy in which people have been categorized. Chiefly it is a division of upper and lower class. The upper class people live general life and the doors of opportunities and possibilities are generally remaining open for them whereas the lower class has been full of opportunities. They are in the margin and have to suffer countless sufferings. In India this casteism mainly exists in the dominating Hindu society which represents the categorization defined by Manushastra, “consists of four major classification namely, *Brahmins* originating from the head of the body, *Kshatriyas* coming out of the shoulder, *Vaishyas* issuing from the belly and *Shudra* being unleashed from the feet.” (Selvem 9)

The turmoil faced by the author because of being Dalit in his life has lucidly described in the book *Joothan* in which he raises a question on one’s entity and recognition. Everyone in this world is known for his or her name and the background most of the times becomes his identity but author’s identity being Dalit always brought oppression and humiliation from the other communities especially upper class people. He states, “At my office, many of my fellow officers and subordinates undervalue my worth because of this surname. In the early day, I used to get angry. In my rage, I would clash with people.” (132)

But as time changed, the approach of the author also changed and he opines differently now:

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 became his identity completely changing its meaning in the process. Today, ‘Bhimrao’ has no meaning without ‘Ambedkar’. (132)

In India there are many lower and backward castes but among them Dalits have been the most backward and lowest class of society. They symbolise the poverty of India. In early Vedic Age when the system of varnas started, it was based on the capability and knowledge of people. But in later Vedic Age this system got disordered and the system started being followed on the basis of heredity. Lower castes were started to be categorized according to their inheritance. They became untouchable being treated as worthless things. This kind of treatment brought

diffidence in them and they became isolated from the mainstream. That is why they were given the name ‘Dalit’ which means in Sanskrit ‘oppressed’. This condition of Dalit during the post-independence has also not improved but even today it has become more challengeable. The author in his book quotes the example of his childhood that:

Once in school, Master Sahab was teaching the lesson on Dronacharya. He told us, almost with in his eyes, that Dronacharya had fed flour dissolved in water to his famished son, Ashwathama, in lieu of milk. The whole class had responded with great emotion to this story of Dronacharya’s dire poverty. This episode was penned by Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata to highlight Drona’s poverty. I had the temerity to stand up and ask Master Sahed a question afterwards. So Ashwathama was given flour mixed in water instead of milk, but what about us who about us who had to drink more? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet even write a word on our lives? (23)

In response of these questions the writer only received humiliation, punishment and termination. But a dalit’s life full of poignancy and hardships also needs to be penned down and this message is clearly given by the author. When such instances come across the readers, they come to know about the lives of others and the circumstances faced by the people whom they never thought of. Therefore, whenever any work which is translated, it has a significant value of making voices accessible to all and the perspective of the writer is received by the readers. Hence, there are many prospects hidden in translated works. The literature of the dalits comprises a group of socially and culturally anguished people who denied presenting their lives according to culturally available scripts. The literary genre of the autobiography in Dalit literature deserves special attention. The unique attribute of the emerging genre of dalit autobiography is typified by a concentration of the experience of the individual. In spite of the emphasis on the individual, there is a sharply outlined relation between the depiction of the individual and its social and public ramifications. Moreover dalit autobiographies quite honestly represent the life experiences and viewpoints of this group of people who are ‘unfortunate bunches’ of caste discrimination in India. These real life narratives by the victims of caste oppression correspond to the mythical bird phoenix which regenerates from its own ashes. Similarly these personal narratives are born from the ashes of the anguish and anger of the unfair social system based on caste.

Om Prakash Valmiki’s celebrated autobiography *Joothan* is one such work of dalit literature which succeeds in giving a voice to groups that were heretofore silenced and suppressed. Valmiki is among the very few grandmasters of contemporary Dalit writing, without whom the very term “Dalit Literature” would mean less than it does. In his autobiographical work *Joothan*, Valmiki highlights the society’s practice of pressing the so-called “untouchables” to the lowest level of society merely because they belong to the ‘lesser caste.’ Despite the fact that the Dalits have made productive and constructive contributions in the creation and development of India, they are visibly neglected. Thus their history and experiences have become largely ‘historical.’ Even though the political power structures proclaim the abolishment of untouchability, a sort of ‘hidden apartheid’ is still visible in the Indian social space. Valmiki’s autobiography stands as a document of protest against the gross and tremendous injustice and victimization that has been the heritage of the Dalits for centuries. The title of the book, ‘*Joothan*’ encapsulates the pain, humiliation and oppression suffered by the Dalit community as

a whole, which has been relegated to the bottom of India's social pyramid for millennia. Valmiki starts out his life story by insisting that:

Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creation. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and compassionless towards Dalits. (vii, Author's Preface)

Untouchability was so rampant even in post-independence India. The Dalits, who were on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, have been subjected to the worst atrocities. The treatment meted out to them was worse than to animals. It was considered all right to touch dogs and cats, but if one happened to touch a "Chuhra", he got contaminated or polluted. They were not seen as humans. They were simply things for use and when the work was done they were thrown away. Valmiki underscores the toughness of the caste system, when he announces: "One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation, but it is impossible to get past caste (2)." Valmiki feels greatly disturbed to note that even if the Dalits wanted to join the mainstream of society after getting an education, the superior classes prevented them from such a gesture. They regard them as 'inferior beings.' "Doubts are cast on their intelligence, their ability, their performance." (127)

Memory is something that cannot be escaped. The Dalits suffer from alienation, frustration and misery. This misery and frustration is common to all dalits trying to adjust in a caste conscious society. Their misery is born out of either their heredity or of the tyranny of the social system. Even the thoughts about the past were bringing in shame, guilt and resentment. Thus the memories of the past itself was terrifying and frustrating. Therefore the crux of the problem is psychological, historical and sociological. Valmiki effectively uses the technique of memory to demonstrate how his present is deeply scarred by his past in spite of the distance he has bridged to become one of the prominent voices in Dalit literature. He recounts his childhood in the village in Barla district of Uttar Pradesh. Unlike his upper class colleagues, Valmiki's childhood memories are tinged with frustration, indifference and sorrow. He was terribly ill-treated in school and the simple explanation for this revilement was that he was an untouchable. He describes the torture he went through when he was asked to spend three days sweeping the school courtyard instead of attending the classroom lectures.

His individuality is often stifled by the upper class society around him and he is often seen as only a faceless member of the society. To them he is nothing more than a 'Dalit', 'Chuhra', or 'Bhangi.' But Valmiki aspires that education is the only window through which he can escape from the mire of untouchability and caste hate and his personal success in education is viewed as a success of the entire "Chuhra" community to which he belong. The powerful tool of education gave him the courage to refuse to crawl backwards with a broom as his ancestors have had to do literally in the past. But in spite of the many successes, he realized that education could erase the boundaries fixed by caste 'only to an extent.' His academic skills and technical expertise often failed to grant him immunity from victimization in a casteist society. He says "as long as people don't know that you are a Dalit, things are fine. The moment they find out your caste, everything changes (134)."

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Being a dalit, author when admitted in the school, was kept abstained from studying most of the times by his teacher which is kind of irony that even after being in the temple of education, he is deprived of education:

I swept the whole day. I had never done so much work, being the pampered one among my brothers..... The second day, as soon as I reached school, Headmaster again put me to sweeping the school. I swept the whole day. I was consoling myself that I will go back to the class from tomorrow (5).

This pain and distress we can perceive in the writings of Valmiki who has shown how subjugated and suppressed was his life and what the plight of Dalit's in the society is. Dalit literature in its initial stages and (even today) was identified as specific protests directed against everyday humiliations that individual Dalits and Dalits as a community face. Most of the debates about Dalit Literature have failed to sufficiently acknowledge the new vocabulary of imagination and aesthetical sensibility produced by these literatures. Dalit literature cannot be reduced to an engagement with victimhood. Dalit Literature today has established itself as a new mode of literary imagination and writing. The transformation in Dalit's condition has been very challenging yet the continuous efforts have been in progress, which raise the voice of Dalit's to come into mainstream. The literature has been an individual measure in this assiduous task and now in recent years the arrival of translation has brought the deplorable plight of Dalit's in centre stage by highlighting the atrocities and suppression Dalit's have to undergo. There have been innumerable accounts of Dalit's' pitiable condition in all around the country yet in scarcity of means or modes they have been unfelt by a larger number of mass. Therefore, the translation has become a mode to show the indeed condition of the Dalit's in the society and more significantly to draw the attention of the common mass towards them so as to enable them to join in mainstream. Certainly the prospects in translation takes a giant step when it raises the issue which society may fell or think over it and the translation of *Joothan* has been epitome of these prospects.

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