

LIFE EXPERIENCES BY PAIN IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S *JOOOTHAN*

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Abstract

Subjugated and segregated for centuries, the dalits in India have occasionally expressed their voice of protest before independence, and with the inspiration provided by figures like Ambedkar, Jyoti Rao Phule etc. their voice of protest have found an ideological base and political maturity. Among all the literary genres, it is the autobiography that helps the Dalit writers to represent their subjective reality; their experiences of pain and suffering, their history, their struggle and movements etc. Dalit autobiographical writings are primarily narratives of injustice and exploitation, and seek social awakening by incorporating those human values. Omprakash Valmiki is a well – known figure among Hindi Dalit writers and his most significant contribution to Dalit writing is his autobiographical account *Joothan*. It showcases how painful his experiences have been throughout his life.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Valmiki saw Dalit literature as a vital part of the struggle for social justice. A pioneer in Dalit writing in Hindi, his autobiography, *Joothan* was translated into English for the first time from the original Hindi in 2003. He talks of growing up in a village near Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh, in an untouchable caste, Chuhra, well before the defiant term Dalit was coined. Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences, only he or she who has suffered this anguish knows its sting. *Joothan* has made a profound impact on his consciousness. It brought to surface, as a scalpel penetrating deep into the flesh, the details of my childhood and adolescence in a small town in Northern India where casteism and untouchability were normal, where untouchables cleaned latrines and carried away the excrement on their heads. When they asked for water, it was poured into their cupped hands, from a distance. There were no untouchables studying with him in school and later at college. His textbooks did inform him about the evil of untouchability and what Mahatma Gandhi had done to eliminate it but in a detached, abstracted manner, couched in a language that seemed to have no connection with his lived reality.

HISTORY OF DALIT LITERATURE

The term Dalit literature was first used in 1958 at the first ever Dalit literature conference held in Bombay. However as an identity, the term Dalit came into prominence in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers activists founded an organization called Dalit Panthers. Dalit literature is nothing but human literature; it dismantles the notion of caste and caste- based oppressions. Dalit writers use their creativity and potential as a powerful tool of resistance against the so called dominant hegemonic discourses. By bringing out the mental agony, suffering, anguish, oppression, rebellion, self- realization and finally the rehabilitation, they try to problematize the notion of class struggle in order to contextualize the Dalit consciousness. They try to portray their lived experience with authenticity and realism.

Joothan is among the first texts in Hindi that identifies itself as a part of Dalit literature, one of the most important literary movements to emerge in post- independence India. On one level, this is 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. On another level, *Joothan* is also a report card on the condition of people who are now routinely called untouchables or ex-untouchables. Untouchability was legally abolished when independent India adopted a new constitution on 26 November 1949.

Valmiki portrays a slice of life that had seldom been recorded in Indian literatures until the advent of Dalit literature in Marathi in the fifties and its subsequent spread to many other languages, notably Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and English. Until then, literature had been the domain of high castes. Untouchables were either mostly absent from literary representations or shown as victims in need of saviours, as objects without voice and agency.

Dalits constitute about 16 percent of India's population. For centuries, they have been at the bottom of India's social pyramid and denied even the most basic human right such as access to drinking water from public lakes and wells, freedom to walk on public roads and freedom to choose an occupation instead of being assigned one by birth. The transformation of the stigmatized identity of these untouchables to a self- chosen identity as Dalit is a story of collective struggle waged over centuries. The term Dalit forcefully expresses their oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root, which means to crack open, split, crush, grind, and so forth and it has generally been used as a verb to describe the process of processing food grains and lentils. Jotirao phule and B. R. Ambedkar, two towering figures in Dalit history.

ABOUT THE TITLE JOOTHAN

The Hindi word *Joothan* literally refers to the scraps of food left on plates that are usually unfit for any further consumption. It means the leftover food given to the lower caste people to eat. Hence, the term is loaded with implications of ritual purity and pollution as *joothan* means polluted. But these were given to the Dalits as if they are only takers of such left over foods in lieu of their toil. Their life depends upon the scraps food of the upper class as wages for their whole day's humiliating toils. Such was the destiny of the Chuhras.

Autobiography has become a very significant and favorite genre in the literary and critical discourse of Dalit writing. The themes of Dalit personal narratives dwell upon the complex inter- personal relationships of the caste Hindu society. These narratives depict the Dalit experience and the traumatic moments of Dalit life. Dalits are thus a major force in India today, playing a decisive role in shaping the future. Spread over the entire country, speaking many languages and belonging to any religions, they are certainly not a homogeneous community.

However, they continue to face certain problems, which emanate from their status as untouchables. In rural areas, Dalit continue to face physical violence including mass killings and rapes by vigilante groups owned and operated by high caste landowners, when they ask for fair wages and freedom from molestation. It is not often that the perpetrators of such violence are apprehended and punished. Dalits struggle against these injustices through political as well as cultural means. Dalit literature is one of the major sites of their resistance and creativity.

Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive, but also our true portrayals of wrong doers. Dalit autobiographies will provide inspiration to our future generations. (Joothan 20)

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NOVEL *JOOZHAN*:

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 collecting, preserving and eating joothan. His memories of being assigned to guard the drying joothan from crows and chickens, and of his relishing the dried and reprocessed joothan burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present. Deep rooted in mental and physical persecution, this narrative highlights the exploitation by the upper class on the deprived section of the society. Lack of education, poverty, a lower economic status etc. was the reasons for their helplessness to protest. They were neglected all the fundamental and civil rights envisaged by the makers of our constitution. By drawing our attention to the typical village life and the atrocities against Dalits, the author himself imparts his own life experience. Even if the government has made provisions and given reservation for the lower caste people, they were devoid of such benefits. With the support and encouragement of his father, Valmiki attended school. The determination, the progressive quest and his zeal to learn didn't work here. At school, Valmiki was beaten up without any cause by his friends and insulted by the teachers.

CONCLUSION:

As Valmiki notes, Dalit writing is born out of brutal experiences. These are experiences shared by many Dalits across India. Dalit trauma has always been represented by others, while the victims have themselves, always been silent. The novel brings to visibility the life of Dalit lived in rural and semi-urban India, where caste is the single dominant factor.

Works Cited

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