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A Study of 'Humiliation' & 'Identity' In Om Prakash Valmiki's "*Joothan*"

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Abstract

The untouchables constitute about sixteen percent of India's population. Because untouchability was legally abolished when independent India adopted a constitution in 1949, today these people are routinely called "erstwhile untouchables" or "ex-untouchables" but they like to call themselves "Dalits." Sympathetic upper caste people and anthropologists, historians, and novelists have written about Dalits, but at last they are beginning to tell their own story. Although they still face bias and hardship, they're playing a decisive role in shaping India today. Valmiki tells a riveting story of growing up during a village in the newly independent India. It is a story of survival, of oppression as grievous as slavery or apartheid, and of victory also, because the author manages to urge an education and ultimately learns to embrace his identity and become a spokesman for his community.

Keywords: study, untouchables, identity, oppression etc

Introduction

Omprakash Valmiki is the author of two collections of poetry and one of short stories. As editor and publisher of various magazines, he has played an important role within the propagation of Dalit literature. Arun Prabha Mukherjee is professor of English at York University in Toronto. She is the author of *Postcolonialism: My Living and Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space* and translated the work *Joothan* in to English language.

Omprakash Valmiki (30 June 1950 – Revolutionary Organization 17 November 2013) was an Indian Dalit writer and poet. well known for his autobiography, *Joothan*, considered a milestone in Dalit literature. He was born at the village of Barla within the Muzzafarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh. After retirement from Government Ordnance Factory he lived in Dehradun where he died of complications arising out of stomach cancer on Revolutionary Organization 17 November 2013.

Being a Dalit child, he was tortured and abused everywhere in society. He was

RESEARCH ARTICLE

fortunate enough to change state during a household where everyone loved and cared for him. The support and encouragement he gained from the family enabled him to face the risks of being a Dalit. Right from the first stages of his life, Valmiki was aware of the importance of studies and hence he was always a bright student. Reading and writing made him an enlightened person . Valmiki married Chanda; despite the protestations his father accepted her as his daughter-in-law. He wasn't allotted a house within the government colony. They had to struggle tons during the initial days of marriage. But he soon settled and both Valmiki and Chanda started a happy married life.

Omprakash Valmiki describes his life as an untouchable, or Dalit, within the newly independent India of the 1950s. Omprakash Valmiki's 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 often an autobiographical account of Valmiki's journey from his birth and upbringing as an untouchable within the newly independent India of the 1950s to today and his pride in being a Dalit.

On another level Joothan is additionally a report on the condition of individuals who are now routinely called "erstwhile untouchables" or "ex-

untouchables." "Joothan" refers to scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or animals. India's untouchables are forced to simply accept and eat joothan for hundreds of years , and therefore the word encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced to measure at the bottom of India's social pyramid.

Although untouchability was abolished in 1949, Dalits continued to face discrimination, economic deprivation, violence, and mock. Valmiki shares his heroic struggle to survive a preordained lifetime of perpetual physical and mental persecution and his transformation into a speaking subject under the influence of the good Dalit political leader, B. R. Ambedkar. A document of the long-silenced and long-denied sufferings of the Dalits, Joothan may be a major contribution to the archives of Dalit history and a manifesto for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness.

After the independence of India, the political leaders of our nation had attempted to eradicate the ominous practice of untouchability through various sanctions in government laws and policies, the validation of its dismantled state was further cemented by the Constitution of India which came into power in 1950. However the scope of removal of untouchability remained limited only to be put pen to paper. That is to say, legal

RESEARCH ARTICLE

changes were made within political framework, but mindsets of larger population were infected with germ of obnoxious caste system. Caste system of India has allotted the untouchables to lowest echelon of society.

This segregated class of individuals has remained downtrodden and is forbidden by the so called upper castes of society to climb up the social ladder and settle themselves down at a better place in society. Labelling them as the depressed class, scheduled class by constitution or addressing them as Harijans by Gandhi failed to confine the anguished state of mind of those people caused by the abhorrence administered to them by their own fellow countrymen and ladies . The dubious and tumultuous nature of their realistic lives and experiences couldn't be made non-visible by wrapping the facts under the garb of law and administration, hopes and aspirations bestowed upon the ex-untouchables by the national leaders. The multifarious trajectories undertaken to grasp and restrain the phenomenon of untouchability have still not addressed the important life bizarre caste rigidity practices which promote precisely the opposite of the values what our state and its constitution strive to face by. The identity crisis resurfaces with a thrust along the lines of precariousness.

The untouchables embraced the term “Dalit” first coined by Jyotirao Phule and further popularised by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Dalit signified the broken people, the defeated people. However, if read between the lines, it might be easier to perceive that the brokenness of individuals carried a bright side of forging new self made identities emerged from the struggles and each quite impediment encountered in their treads of progression. To convey their unheard words, unfelt emotions, above all, rectify the misconstrued facts of their lives, the Dalits, who are fortunate enough to cultivate knowledge and scholarship and secured alleged high esteemed disposition in society, have articulated such reminiscence and disseminated them through the medium of cultural, literary events, popularly and collectively referred to as Dalit literature.

Dalit Autobiography and ‘Joothan’

Dalit autobiographies act as distinctive a part of Dalit literature. The nature of autobiographies is transparent and inclusive. Autobiographies present the important life experiences, but it goes beyond the lifetime of the author . Not only does Dalit autobiography discuss lifetime of a private plagued with the oppression of class structure but it speaks at communal level. Story of 1 Dalit life provides an insight to the lives of the many other Dalit people. Though one autobiographical character remains the locus, the stories of

RESEARCH ARTICLE

supporting characters also are significant to be paid heed to. One such Dalit autobiography is 'Joothan', written by Omprakash Valmiki. The autobiography was written in Hindi, later its translation in English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee secured for it a national recognition by expanding the scope of readership.

Joothan is a collection of memoirs. The nature of non linearity of the story precludes the monotony to require an important toll on the minds of readers. It is rather a dovetail sewed with the author's fragment memories of his childhood filled with hardships pertaining to his belonging in the 'Chuhra' community. Throughout the text, Valmiki makes it some extent to say the undeniable differences between the untouchables and therefore the upper caste people, which had already been created by the caste hierarchization of society. He is extremely polemical in reacting to hypocrisy of Gandhiji to call the untouchables the youngsters of God and at an equivalent time to urge for preservation of Varna system of Indian society. To Valmiki, 'The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights this was the environment of my childhood. If the people that call the class structure a perfect social arrangement had to measure during this environment for each day or two, they might change their mind'.

Thus, implication of his statement is to form an urge to the loquacious bunch of upper caste people to step into the shoes of a Dalit to feel the bitterness of this hellish life, which may be otherwise, only be experienced by Dalit himself. Also, in many other instances, Valmiki elaborates the distinguishing idiosyncrasies of lives of Dalits than that of upper caste 'Tyagis' of their village. He points out the 'the deities worshipped by the Dalits are 'different from Hindu deities and their names won't be found in any 'Purana' albeit one searches hard' and also Dalits worship 'Jaharpir' at 'Janmashtami' and 'Mai Madaran' during 'Deepawali' in lieu of Lord Krishna and goddess 'Lakshmi' respectively. I perceive this assertion of differences in voice of Valmiki as an effort on the part of his community to face out of the Hindu fold, to ban itself from being a neighborhood of socio-religious integrated system of Hinduism. The scrupulous mention of the dichotomy between Dalits as 'we', 'us' and upper castes as 'they', 'them' is significantly manifested throughout his text.

The subhuman existence of Chuhra community, its plight of everyday and groaning of hunger and starvation, deprivation of reverent existence, are all encapsulated in the term "Joothan". Valmiki narrates for us the values of joothan or leftover received by them from the Tyagi upper caste community. The

RESEARCH ARTICLE

leftover foods were rugged and grubby in nature, albeit the Chuhra's had them with relish. The consumption of pork by the 'Chuhras' were looked down upon by the 'Tyagis', the author also notes that 'The behaviour of (this) Muslim Tagas was just like that of the Hindu Tagas'. On being exasperated at the general rebuking character of upper castes people, Hindu and Muslim Tyagis both alike, Valmiki at one instance bewrayed their hypocrite temperament and he went on to say 'At such moments I would think of all the Tyagis who came in the darkness of the night to the Bhangi basti to eat pork. ..Those who came to eat meat secretly at night in day light observed untouchability in front of everybody.'

The author's struggle to adjust to the educational ambience of school, primarily marked by the presence of upper castes Tyagis was burdensome and exhausting. The fact that, so called untouchables getting an opportunity of receiving education meant forging of arduous parity between the upper castes Tyagis and the ex-untouchables 'Chuhra' which was frowned upon by the former community. Thus the untouchables became easy targets of the wrath of Tyagis.

Valmiki expressed through penning down his story his helplessness when people teased him by calling "Chuhre ke", credential was his determination which got

him through this nauseating phase and made him what he was in his later life. The caste discrimination had expanded from his dwelling to the school, so expanded the range of animosity to the author. He was isolated and made sit on a corner of the room. His other friends who were too untouchables, Ram Singh and Sukkham Singh were treated alike.

Valmiki narrates an incident of unspeakable torture of Sukkham Singh by Kaliram, the headmaster of their school. Kaliram also compelled young Valmiki to sweep the entire school premises. Despite all the hurdles on his way, the author endured hardships in the hope that his father's words might come true, that was to improve caste by education. Never indulgent in menial works, Omprakash found it disgraceful to scavenging, reaping and disposing dead cattle.

Conclusion

The searing instances from the first Dalit autobiography in Hindi literature (later translated to English) claim an important space – not only in literature, but also in the consciousness of the reader. The lessons and teaching of *Joothan* cannot be contained in a physical copy of the book, nor can it be limited to a digital repository. Valmiki's words linger, and remind us how this is a space that Dalit voices have been denied through systemic ostracisation.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reading *Joothan* was an emotional experience, but funnily enough, what to take away and keep with us is this overwhelming sense of sheer discomfort.

Unlike racism, graded inequality is created by the caste system and is a watertight societal structure where the oppressed are not only unable to access any form of privilege, but they too oppress another community in the caste maze. This is the heinous nature of the system in which a lonely Valmiki finds himself.

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