

Agonies of Being a Dalit in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*: A Study.

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Abstract:

Like other autobiographical writers, Omprakash Valmiki expresses the Dalit confrontation in his well-known narrative, *Joothan*. He lays out his entire existence, describing every facet of his unsettling social experiences. Thus, the journey of Dalit prejudice and societal boycott is the subject of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*. Meanwhile, it's a pitiable story of a Dalit family trying to find identity and self-worth in Indian Hindu society. Omprakash Valmiki depicted his life as a Dalit and an untouchable in the recently independent India. The story of *Joothan* alludes to food scraps that are intended for animals and garbage. For generations, it has been mandatory for India's untouchables to recognize and consume leftovers. The word "untouchables" refers to the suffering, dehumanization, and impoverishment experienced by this group of people who are compelled to live at the base of India's social hierarchy. Despite the abolition of untouchability, Dalits continue to experience discrimination, poverty, hostility, and derision. *Joothan* takes seriously the fact that the Dalits had to fight for education for a very long time, even after gaining independence. Valmiki talks about how the great Dalit political thinker and crusader Dr B R Ambedkar inspired him to rebel fearlessly in order to escape a predestined life of constant bodily and emotional suffering. *Joothan* is a crucial component of the archives of Dalit history and a proposal for a fundamental transformation of humanity and human consciousness. It is an article on the long-suppressed and long-denied sufferings of Dalits. Dalits are enduring injustice, poverty, antagonism, and mockery without quitting. This paper aims to explicate the agonies of being a Dalit in the post Independent Hindu society of India in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*.

Keywords: Dalit, Discrimination, Caste, Joothan, Humiliation.

Arun Prabha Mukherjee translated Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, a work of Dalit literature, into English in 2003 after it was first published in Hindi in 1997. It is a memoir about growing up outside of a normal Uttar Pradesh hamlet in the 1950s as an "untouchable." *Joothan*, which is presented as a collection of sharply observed anecdotes, is actually an amazing chronicle of a unique Indian adventure, one that propelled a young man from abject poverty to become a well-known writer and social commentator.

In his book "*Joothan*," Valmiki talked about the prejudice they encountered in the classroom on several occasions. He states, "We were not allowed to sip water from the glass during the examinations when we were thirsty. We had to cup our hands to drink the water. To avoid our hands touching the glass, the peon would pour water from a great height" (16). Om Prakash Valmiki writes of growing up in 1950s, newly independent India, as an untouchable, or Dalit. "*Joothan*" describes food crumbs that are left on a plate and are either going to be thrown out or eaten by animals. For ages, the untouchables in India have been compelled

to consume and tolerate *joothan*, a term that perfectly captures the suffering, deprivation, and impoverishment experienced by a group of people compelled to reside at the base of the country's social hierarchy. Even after untouchability was outlawed in 1949, Dalits still had to deal with prejudice, hardship, violence, and mockery.

In his autobiography, Om Prakash Valmiki states at the outset that “Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences that were unable to be included in works of literature. Our upbringing has exposed us to an incredibly harsh and inhumane societal structure and sympathetic to the Dalits” (vii). In exchange for their diligent but unpaid labour, the upper castes toss out leftover food, which Valmiki explains is the lifeblood of his entire society. The entire community was forced to rely on the kindness of the upper castes, who took advantage of them rather than providing labour. The word “junk food” in the autobiography “*Joothan*” refers to food that is actually left on a plate after eating and is typically thrown in the trash in a middle-class urban home. But such meal would only be considered “*joothan*” if it was consumed by someone other than the original consumer. Valmiki provides a thorough explanation of how to gather, preserve, and consume *joothan*. He was given the task of keeping crows and hens away from the drying *joothan*. They used to like the reprocessed and dried *joothan*. He feels humiliated and hurt all over again by these memories of the past.

The passage in which Valmiki's mother overturns a basket full of *joothan* in front of Mr. Tyagi in protest at being humiliated is one of the book's most moving scenes. “You are taking a basket full of *joothan*,” Sukhdev Singh replied, gesturing to the basket containing the filthy pattals. You also want to provide meals for your kids. Remember where you belong, Chuhri. Grab your basket and move on. She immediately began to empty the basket and yelled at Sukhdev Singh, “Pick it up and put it inside your house.” Tomorrow morning, feed it to the *baratis* (11). When he lunged at her, she confronted him like a “lioness.” The child's seeds of disobedience are sown by Valmiki's mother's act of defiance.

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. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away. However, the stark reality that he so effectively captures highlights the fall short of the promises made in India's independent Constitution. *Joothan* joins the clamour of Dalit voices seeking their rightful position under the sun by adamantly requesting the promissory note. A manifesto for the radical transformation of human consciousness and society, *Jonathan* challenges readers to consider hard questions about their own humanity and extends an invitation to participate in the global endeavour of human freedom.

Limbale says that instead of using the conventional framework for assessing and comprehending literature, which is tainted with caste- and class-based values, we gauge a Dalit text's effectiveness by how much of an impact it has on the reader's consciousness. This translated edition of *Joothan* will have succeeded if it can draw readers in by stimulating their empathy and consciousness.

Omprakash Valmiki narrates the story of the *Chuhra* basti where his family resided. He shared the residence with his family, five boys, and one daughter, along with his uncles, who were two chachas and one tau. Chachas did not live with his Tau. Every family member had a job of some kind. They were yet unable to get two hearty meals a day. For the Tagas, they did a range of jobs including housecleaning, agricultural work, and general labour. They would often have to work for nothing. For this unpaid work, they received neither grain nor money, yet no one dared to dispute it. Instead, they endured mistreatment and curses. The upper caste members did not address them by name. Even if they were older than members of the higher caste, they would still be addressed as “Oe, Chuhre” by others. “Abey, Chuhre,” he would say to someone who was at least as old as him. Touching dogs, cats, cows, and buffaloes was permissible due to the widespread untouchability of these animals; nevertheless, if a member of a higher caste occurred to touch a Chuhra, they

would become tainted or filthy. People from higher castes don't regard Chuhra as equals. They were only tools to be employed. They were helpful up until the job was finished.

Omprakash Valmiki narrates his personal agonies though, eight years have passed since the nation gained its independence but the socio-economic conditions of the untouchables could not be improved. To say the movement of social uplift of the untouchables led by Mahatma Gandhi made an impact on everyone but it failed to change the bitter ground realities. Dr Ambedkar in his interview with BBC rightly said that, many of Mahatmas have come and gone but the condition of untouchables remained the same. Even though untouchables may now enrol in government schools, the general public's mindset had not significantly changed. Even having to sit apart from the other students in the class wasn't enough. In the words of Valmiki what he felt like:

The country had become independent eight years earlier. Gandhiji's uplifting of the untouchables was having ramifications everywhere. Although the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others in the class, and even that wasn't enough. I was not allowed to sit on a chair or a bench. I had to sit on the bare floor; I was not allowed even to sit on the mat. Sometimes I would have to sit way behind everybody, right near the door. From there, the letters on the board seemed faded. (3)

It was forbidden for me to take a seat on a bench or chair. I was not even permitted to sit on the mat; instead, I had to sit on the bare floor. I occasionally had to sit directly behind everyone, close to the door. The letters on the board appeared to have faded after that. Teachers used to behave so nefariously that they addressed their students by their caste identity and which have been so humiliating can be understood by following lines from *Joothan*:

Abbey, what is your name? Was the question the headmaster Kaliram asked me when he called me into his chamber one day. With fear, I said, "Omprakash," very slowly. Kids utilized to experience fear upon meeting the headmaster. He instilled fear throughout the entire school. The headmaster asked me, "*Chuhre ka?*" as his second question. "Ji." All right. There, there is that teak tree? Proceed. Scale that tree. For a broom, break off some twigs. And make the entire school as spotless as a mirror. After all, it's your family job. "Go ahead and start working on it. (5)

I cleaned every room and the verandas as instructed by the headmaster. He approached me as I was ready to finish and said, "Go sweep the playground after you have finished the rooms."

The playground was much larger than my small physique could handle, and in cleaning it my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. I had dust inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. The headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water. I swept the whole day. I had never done so much work, being the pampered one among my brothers. (5)

The headmaster did not stop here, he pounced on his neck. The pressure of his fingers was increasing. As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged him out of the class and threw him on the ground. He screamed, go and sweep the whole playground—otherwise he will shove chilis up his ass and throw him out of the school. Such language used by upper caste teachers who are revered more than even God in India. Seeing inhuman behaviour of the school teachers of his son, Omprakash Valmiki's father was reminded of the image of Droncharya the way he behaved with Eklavya. He went to *Sarpanch* and asked, "Chowdhuri Sahib, you say that the government has opened the doors of the schools for the children of Chuhras and Chamars. And that headmaster makes this child of mine to come out of the class and sweep all day instead of teaching him. If he has to sweep the school all day, then you tell me: When is he going to study" (7)?

The narrator recalls an incident when a member of Tyagi family named Surendra came to visit him and he not only stayed but he also eat with him. Valmiki says that, Surendra had not even been born then.

His aunt that was Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's daughter was getting married. And the narrator's mother used to clean their place. For ten to twelve days before the wedding his parents were doing all sorts of work at Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's home. A daughter's wedding meant that the prestige of the entire village was at stake. Everything had to be perfect. His father went from village to village to collect rope-string cots for the guests. The bridegroom's party was eating. And his mother was sitting outside the door with her basket. The narrator and his sister Maya, who was younger than him, sat close to their mother in the hope that they too would get a share of the sweets and the gourmet dishes that they could smell cooking inside. When all the people had left after the feast, the mother said to Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, as he was crossing the courtyard to come to the front door, "Chowdhuriji, all of your guests have eaten and gone. . . . Please put something on a leaf plate for my children. They too have waited for this day." Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty leaf plates and said, "You are taking a basketful of *joothan*. And on top of that you want food for your children? Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going." (12).

Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's comments resonated deeply in his heart and thoughts. They will sing to him for the rest of his life. It was as though the mother goddess Durga looked into his mother's eyes that night. It was the first time he had ever seen his mother so furious that she could no longer take the shame. There and there, she emptied the basket. "Please pick it up and put it inside your house," she urged to Sukhdev Singh. Serve it to the groom's guests first thing tomorrow morning. Like an arrow, she snatched my sister and me and took off. My mother had faced Sukhdev Singh like a fierce lioness after he had lunged at her with a blow. After that his mother never went back to his door after that day. She also quit taking their *Joothan* after this occurrence. The narrator is reminded of his childhood days in his village when a member from the Tyagi family went to him, in his own words:

This past year Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's grandson, Surendra, visited my house in connection with some interview. He had obtained my address in the village. He stayed the night with us. My wife fed him a nice meal, and while eating, he said, "Bhabhiji, you make such delicious food. No one in our family can cook so well."¹² His compliment made my wife happy, but I was deeply disturbed for quite some time. The incidents of childhood began knocking at my memory's door again. (11)

Similar caste and class prejudice issues are found in contemporary Hindi literature, according to Valmiki, who also claims that upper-caste writers are unaware of the sufferings of Dalits and that their writing is merely surface-level, motivated by pity rather than a desire for reform or atonement. Attempts by mainstream critics to classify these high caste depictions of Dalits as Dalit literature have been challenged by Dalit writers and commentators. They claim that Dalit literature can be written only by Dalits, "Dragging and cutting dead animals - how will non-Dalits write about the experience of Dalits with the power of their imagination? How will they feel the angry ideas rising in the hearts of untouchables on the basis of their helpless imagination" (Limbale xxxiv). In a similar spirit, Valmiki makes fun of Hindi author Kashinath Singh for saying that "one need not be a horse to write about one; only the horse, tethered to its stall after a full day of labouring, knows how it feels and not its owner." Dalit writers are not the only ones who have made such assertions; native writers from the US and Canada have as well.

By equating the reader's emotions with the suffering and struggles of the Dalits, this narrative seeks to arouse human emotions. The food that is left on a plate that is meant for rubbish or animals is the subject of the well-known fable "*Juthan*." The phrase "untouchables" refers to the suffering, shame, and poverty of the group of people compelled to live at the base of India's social hierarchy. These people have been forced to acknowledge and consume leftovers for millennia. In conclusion, Valmiki states that although India has evolved into a more advanced culture, the plight of the Dalits has not altered. Additionally, he said that only people who have gone through those painful situations can truly understand its sting one important tool for defending civilizing uniformity is the caste system. In an effort to refute this idea and highlight the disparate realities of caste discrimination, Valmiki presents his narrative. He gave numerous instances of being ashamed

of his class status. This work raises with great concern the issue of the caste system that has been established in Indian society.

In fact, by urging that readers of upper caste and class remember their privilege, Joothan calls for a fundamental departure from these readers. *Joothan's* dual approach problematizes the reader's caste and class, in contrast to canonical Hindi or English writing, where these factors are frequently regarded as inconsequential. Although Valmiki lashes out at non-Dalit readers with satire, irony, and rage, he views Dalit readers as fellow suffering. One of the text's main points is the critique of an unfair societal structure and those who support it, but its other major focus is a thorough analysis of Dalit lives. *Joothan* blends depictions of the battle between the enemy outside and the enemy inside Dalit people of higher castes. The superstitions of the Dalit villagers, the patriarchal treatment of Dalit women by their men, the attempts of middle-class Dalits to "pass" as members of a higher caste and the ensuing denial of their inferiority complex, which leads them to condemn the rural Dalits' practice of raising pigs—all these facets of the Dalit struggle are equally significant to *Joothan*. Many Dalits have criticized him harshly for this self-criticism, believing that it is like to airing dirty laundry in public and that the honest depiction of Dalit society is degrading to them. These Dalits, according to Valmiki, have given in to Brahminism. The persons concerned must have been hurt by his candid criticism of his own family members who publicly reject their kinship to Valmiki by hiding their caste, especially since he named them.

The concept of Dalit freedom in India is attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy is firmly grounded in the principle of local empowerment. Gandhi's emphasis on decentralization, social harmony, the traditional village as an autonomous republic, and hostility to secularism are all shared by a number of modern Indian social groups. The Dalit Movement today rejects Gandhism in favor of Dr. Ambedkar, another important figure in Indian history, even if the majority of social movements in the country are still led by Gandhi's teachings. Dalits hold immense pride and respect for Ambedkar due to his remarkable academic achievements, including two doctorates from Columbia University and the London School of Economics, his leadership in opposing Hinduism and untouchability, and his status as the founder of the modern Indian state. Ambedkar continues to be a source of inspiration for the Dalit movement and gives legitimacy to actions like speaking out against casteism both inside and externally.

The scholar has examined Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* in the context of the Dalit movement in India, viewing it as a crucial component of such movement. Omprakash Valmiki addresses the topic of Dalits in India being subjected to humiliation regardless of their place of residence in *Joothan*. The cause of this humiliation is the upper caste's internalized sense of Dalit inferiority, which has led to centuries of exceptional idioms, symbols, and physical and verbal denigration of the Dalit among its members. It is ingrained in the upper caste's literary and creative sensibilities and imagination. According to the research, *Joothan* is a representative Dalit literary text that, in addition to exposing the suffering and humiliation one endures in a society rife with castes, also suggests ways to resist discrimination and free the castes and classes that are otherwise oppressed.

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