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Articulating the Subjugated Voice of the Voiceless: A Reading of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*: *A Dalit's Life*

Abstract

Omprakash Valmiki is a well-known figure among Hindi Dalit writers and his most significant contribution to Dalit writing is his autobiographical account Joothan. His writing focuses on the caste system that is deeply embedded in the Indian psyche that all the assays made to end exploitation and to establish equality among the people becomes a sheer waste. Joothan means the scraps of food left over after a meal. The name alludes to the ignominious life of humiliation and poverty of the Dalit community which had to rely on Joothan for their survival. Valmiki describes his childhood in the village in Barla district of Uttar Pradesh. He writes about the ill treatment he suffered when he was at school because he was an untouchable. As a document of the long silenced and long denied sufferings of the Dalits, Joothan is not only a contribution to the annals of Dalit history, but a proposal for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit, Indian psyche, human consciousness

"Dalit literature is the literature of the masses. It is a literature of action, based on human values, wages of struggle born out of anger and rebellion against fantastic mindsets." (Valmiki, *Dalit Sahitya* 15). Omprakash Valmiki is a well-known figure among Hindi Dalit writers and his most significant contribution to Dalit writing is his autobiographical account *Joothan*. His writings focus on the age-old caste system in India. The writer deliberately uses the name Valmiki as a mark of recognition with the sweeper caste to which he belongs. His writing focuses on the caste system that is deeply embedded in the Indian psyche that all the assays made to end exploitation and to establish equality among the people becomes a sheer waste. Valmiki forces his readers to acknowledge that this cursed system still exists both blatantly and covertly in the rural areas and in the cities which are apparently more liberal.

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"Valmiki does not, cannot, claim the authority to address a national collectivity. On the contrary, he aims to point out the exclusion of people like him from the imagined community of the naion" (Mukherhjee 38). The title of this autobiographical account, *Joothan,* carries in it the pain, the humiliation and the poverty of the untouchable Chuhra community of Uttar Pradesh, to which the author belongs. The untouchables or Dalits who were social outcasts not only had to rely on the joothan of others but also had to relish it. Joothan means the scraps of food left over after a meal. The name alludes to the ignominious life of humiliation and poverty of the Dalit community which had to rely on Joothan for their survival. The treatment meted out to them was worse than that of animals. Valmiki describes his childhood in the village in Barla district of Uttar Pradesh. He writes about the ill treatment he suffered when he was at school because he was an untouchable. He describes the sufferings he went through when he was asked to spend three days sweeping the school courtyard instead of accompanying his classmates belonging to the higher castes, in the study class. Despite the barriers of caste which proved to be an impediment at every step throughout his years in school and college, Valmiki persevered to get better education and got reformed. Both his parents have been portrayed as heroic figures in the text. They desired something better for their child and fought for his safety and growth. One of the most powerful moments in the text is when his mother overturned a basketful of joothan at a wedding after a high-caste Tyagi humiliated her. His father, Chotan Lal, always stood by Valmiki and told him that he should always do what he desired. This coming members of a community that had been socially and economically oppressed for centuries is a symbol of great valour and determination. It is quite apt that Valmiki has dedicated this text to them. 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" he found out that just the disclosure of his real caste to well-educated middle class people was received by surprise 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 finely contests the belief that the oppression of the Dalits by the Savarnas is justified as per the Hindu religious laws.

Valmiki was born into the Chuhra caste (aka *Bhangi*) whose fated job it was to sweep the roads, clean the cattle barns, get shift off the floor, dispose of dead animals, work the fields during harvests, and perform other physical labour for upper caste people, including the Tyagi Brahmins who called out not by their names but as '*ou chuhre*' or '*abey chuhre*' which reflects

contempt and detestation. They could touch cows and even stray dogs, but not the *Chuhra* people who were forced to live outside the village reserved for upper caste people. Valmiki's house was near a cowshed. A pond separated the houses of the Dalits-the Chuhras from the village. The houses of Tagas, upper caste Hindus were made of brick. Those of the Dalits were made of mud. The women defecated in the open-air latrine. The author's family lived in the Dalit colony. They worked for the Tagas without getting any money. The Chuhras had to remain untouched and unseen by the upper castes as they were considered pollutants that infected the Tagas.

The Government schools did not allow the Chuhra children to get education. Valmiki learned the alphabet in the open school of a Christian. Only after a quarrel with his master, Valmiki's father got his son admitted in the school. The boy had to sit on the floor and he had to suffer much pain and humiliation from his teachers as well as the children of the Savarnas. It was the fate of every Dalit child in the school. They have to even control their natural feelings like thirst, hunger etc. Valmiki was also abused for his dress code. "This was our no win situation. We were humiliated whichever way we dressed" (*Joothan* 3).

When Valmiki entered the fourth class, he was beaten everyday by the Headmaster. He narrates a specific incident which he remembers that one day the teacher beat Sukkhan Singh, a Dalit classmate and hit a boil on his belly. Even though the boil burst, the teacher continued abusing him. Once Valmiki was asked to climb a teak tree, break some branches and make a broom. After that he was also instructed to sweep the playground. The Headmaster of the school scolded him by saying, "Go sweep the whole playground… Otherwise I will shore chillies up your arse and throw you out of the school" (*Joothan* 5). This torture continued for days and Valmiki could do nothing but only cry. His father happened to see his son's miserable plight at school, but could not do anything about it. But later he sought the help of the chieftain who helped him to get his son readmitted to school. Being a Dalit, he had to suffer much pain and oppression everywhere in the society.

Valmiki was not allowed to participate in the extracurricular activities, though he was a good student in his studies. "The so-called descendants of the Gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door" (16). Even if later, Valmiki could secure a government job after much struggle, he was denied social respectability in the society only because he was a member of the Dalit community. *Joothan* is not merely an autobiography, but it is the voice of the innumerable voiceless people who face all sorts of subjugation and torture because they are born in a lower class where self-esteem and self-identity are least important. With digital clarity, the author depicts his distressing Dalit experience from childhood to adolescence.

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