

Peripheral To Mainstream – Aspiring For Egalitarianism: A Censorious Perusal Of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

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Abstract: *Literature is uttered to foresee, reproduce and frame life it to its objectives. Dalit literatures have a unanimous purpose to manifest their lives, challenges and potentialities. This paper endeavours to focus on the oppression faced by the Dalit community and how the power suppresses their dreams and aspiration get into the mainstream society. The paper entitled, “Peripheral to Mainstream – Aspiring for Egalitarianism: A Censorious perusal of Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan” talks about the oppression and suppression faced by the Dalit youth.*

Keywords: *Dalit Lives, Dalit Challenges, Dalit Potentialities, Power, Suppression and Oppression.*

I. Introduction

According to the perspective of Arjun Dangle, “Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India...It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.”[2].

We can see a historical significance in the emergence of Dalit literature. Dalit studies originate from the oppression, suppression, dalit lives, their challenges etc. but ends in a revolutionaristic way. Dalit literature is a post-independent literary experience that narrates the story of the marginalized groups of the nation. Dalit literature exposes how people from the marginalized community have become victims of ancient customary practices done by the forward class according to the social hierarchy. Himanshu Charan Sadangi in his book *Dalit: The Downtrodden of India* mentions Dalits as:

Dalit has come to mean things or persons who are cut, split, broken or torn asunder, scattered or crushed and destroyed. By coincidence, there is in Hebrew a root ‘dal’ meaning low, weak, poor. In the Bible, different forms of this term have been used to describe people who have been reduced to nothingness or helplessness. The present usage of the term Dalit goes back to the nineteenth century, when a Marathi social reformer and revolutionary, Mahatma Jyothirao Phule (1826-1890), used it to describe the Outcastes and Untouchables as the oppressed and the broken victims of our caste-ridden society. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), this term gained greater importance and popularity. [1-2] (Himanshu Charan Sadangi).

Due to the caste-based hierarchy and low level status, society treats them as inferiors in their occupation. So they made efforts for the Dalit leadership for edifying their status and created the Dalit movement.

Many movements in Hinduism have welcomed Dalit into their fold, the earliest being the Bhakti movements of the medieval period. Early Dalit politics involved many Hindu reform movements which arose primarily as a reaction to the advent of Christian Missionaries in India and their attempts to mass-convert Dalit to Christianity under the allure of escaping the caste system (unfortunately, there is a Caste system among Indian Christians which retains practices leftover from Vedic Hinduism, but only among certain sections of Indian Catholics)

In the 19th Century, the Brahmo Samaj under Raja Ram Mohan Roy, actively campaigned against untouchability. The Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayanand also renounced discrimination against Dalit. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa founded the Ramakrishna Mission that participated in the emancipation of Dalit. Upper caste Hindus, such as Mannathu Padmanabhan also participated in movements to abolish Untouchability against Dalit, opening his family temple for Dalit to worship. While there always have been places for Dalit to worship, the first “upper-caste” temple to openly welcome Dalit into their fold was the Laxminarayan Temple in Wardha in the year 1928 (the move was spearheaded by reformer Jannalal Bajaj). [146-147] (Himanshu Charan Sadangi).

II. Joothan – An Overview

Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, is a Dalit autobiography of his birth and life as an untouchable. Literally, Joothan means, ‘scrap of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or for the family pet in a middle-class urban home’. Most of the times, Dalits were forced to eat the leftover food by someone. Dalits have been forced to eat Joothan for their livelihood for centuries. Even though in 1949, our newly independent India was authorized abolition of untouchability but dalits were victims of violence, economic deprivation and discrimination till now.

Valmiki was a renowned Indian dalit poet and writer; he was famed for his autobiography *Joothan*. He was born in Uttarpradesh in Barla village and belongs to the chuhra community of Uttarpradesh which is considered as the bottom lined caste according to India’s social pyramid. But he was inspired and influenced by the Dalit political leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

Joothan is a complete manifesto of his life and how he struggles and it’s a major contribution of the history of dalits belongs to Chuhra community and finally a portrayal of his revolutionary transformation in a caste conscious vigorous society.

III. Pheripheral to Mainstream

In the case of Indian literature too, there also we can see dalit literature in various languages that were translated into our global language English. It helps us to know about their stories and how all states treated the untouchables, their customs etc.

Valmiki himself says about his experience of narrating a dalit story and the translator of his autobiography Arun Prabha Mukherjee Quoted it as follows:

OMPRAKASH VALMIKI’S *Joothan* is among that short list of books that have made a profound impact on my 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 our 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 me in my school and, later, at college. My textbooks did inform me 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 my lived reality.

Joothan had a visceral impact on me because in writing his life story of being born in the Chuhra caste and growing up in Barla in north India, Valmiki spoke of the realities and contradictions of my society that had been shut out with thick walls of denial. Although I had been introduced to Marathi Dalit literature in translation before I read Joothan, its impact was way higher on the Richter scale of my consciousness because it was speaking of my corner of India, in my first language, Hindi, in a way no other text had ever spoken to me. [ix-x] (Arun Prabha Mukherjee) Though an untouchable, Omprakash Valmiki survived in a caste conscious society. His strong determination and perseverance aided him to achieve his goal in the form of education and job. Arun Prabha Mukherjee noted in his translated version of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* as follows:

Joothan is a multivalent, polyvocal text, healing the fractured self through narrating, contributing to the archive of Dalit history, opening a dialogue with the silencing oppressors, and providing solace as well as frank criticism to his own people. Its overall effect is truly paradoxical. For the fact that Valmiki has become a speaking subject indicates that Indian democracy has opened some escape hatches through which a critical mass of articulate, educated Dalits has emerged. On the other hand, the harsh realities that he portrays so powerfully underscore the fact that the promises made in the Constitution of independent India have not yet been fully met. Joothan stridently asks for the promissory note, joining a chorus of Dalit voices that are demanding their rightful place under the sun. A manifesto for revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness, Joothan confronts its readers with difficult questions about their own humanity, and invites them to join the universal project of human liberation. [xxxiii- xxxix] (Arun Prabha Mukherjee).

IV. Subaltern Studies

Literally, subaltern means 'of inferior rank'. This term was adopted by Antonio Gramsci to mention the working class people of the Soviet Union because they were subjected to the hegemony and power of the ruling class. *Claiming Power from Below: Dalits and the Subaltern Question in India* identifies the term subaltern through the viewpoint of Ranajit Guha in his "Preface to the Volume":

Word 'subaltern' in the title stands for the meaning as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that is, 'of inferior rank'. It will be used... as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way... There will be much... which should relate to the history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity as well as to the attitudes, ideologies and belief systems- in short, the culture informing that condition (Guha 1994:vii). [1] (Manu Bhagavan and Anne Feldhaus).

V. Conclusion

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* represents the awful lives of dalits in the Chuhra community. Even though he died in 2012, he is remembered through his writings and memoir. We can see Valmiki's journey of life from the peripheral to mainstream and he aspired for egalitarianism.

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