

Mirroring Casteism in *Joothan*: Dalit Assertion to the Socio-Cultural Aggression**Altaf Ahmad Bhat¹**

Assistant Professor

J&K Higher Education Department

Fancy Akhter², Teacher- J&K Govt. Service

Abstract: *Dalit Literature is an important form of contemporary Indian Literature dealing with down trodden segments of populace. Although having its own past, yet it is the last three decades, when it has borne fruits and reached maturity. Through it, the concerned writers have achieved identity and appreciation. Omprakash Valmiki is doubtlessly a stalwart in the field. His lucid style and thought-provoking imagery have popularized him and universalized the issues of Dalits. His Joothan: A Dalit's Life is a masterpiece in this field. The book fabulously unravels the stark reality of Indian social setup replete with monstrous evils and foibles. The present study evaluates the book from the perspective of caste system still operant with full swing and it demonstrates how the targeted people resist it. It is affirmed that despite hollow claims of India as a Socialist Secular Democratic Republic- free from all hurdles of caste, creed, religion, and region, the people of lower strata ceaselessly suffer at the hands of so called sophisticated and upper class masters.*

Keywords: *Caste, Dalit and Discrimination.*

Introduction

India is a miraculous as well as ambiguous nation. It is amalgamation of good and evil; benign and malign. It is verily cosmos. What is here is in scattered world. It is simultaneously traditional and modern. It looks 'before and after'. Preaching and practicing are at loggerheads. Although progresses with notches, yet it regresses with miles. The socio-cultural structure is rich and profound, but behind this façade are hideous practices. The conventional practices are acted upon by so called civilized and educated people with pride. On the one hand, India is declared as a secular country –free from all biases of caste, color, race, religion, language and region. On the other hand, the discrimination is made on the basis of same at the gigantic scale. When examined minutely, one is confronted with appalling realities of Indian ethnic edifice. Among them casteism is working with full sway and has fathomless strong roots. Since bygone times,

endeavours have been made to mitigate if not eradicate the effect of casteism, but the seeds of the struggle have not yielded expected results. At present on the ground level, there does not seem much difference between the traditional caste ridden society and the claimed democratic caste free nation. The same caste discrimination is at the core of Dalit Literature as the issue has been lamented by B. R. Ambedkar pertinently: “The mother of our poverty and lowliness is untouchability”.

Origin and History of the Concept ‘Dalit’

Etymologically, the word ‘Dalit’ has its origin in Sanskrit and it implies- ‘suppressed’, ‘downtrodden’, ‘ground’, ‘crushed’ or ‘broken pieces’. Like Plato’s tripartite structure of society (producing class, military class and ruling class), the Hindu religious scripture ‘*Manu Smriti*’ describes ‘*Varna System*’ of the society based on the same type of hierarchical positions. Founded on myth, this ‘*Varna system*’ consists of four kinds of people borne out of the body of Lord Vishnu. This mythical belief divides people into segments- *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras* representing respectively head, arms, abdomen and feet of the said god. In this system *Shudras* are considered slaves borne out of feet and so meant for the service of the whole society. The same *Shudras* or Dalits are looked upon as inferior, outcastes and mean. The relation between so called upper caste people and Dalits may be identified as colonizer-colonized in colonialism, male-female in patriarchal setup and white-black in Afro-American scenario. In these bifurcations the first term in each system foregrounds positive attributes like superior, rational, cultured, civilized and self-sufficient, while as the second category represents traits-inferior, irrational, crude, savage and deficient.

The concept Dalit is not a modern invention, but it has conventional strong roots. Madara Chennaiah, an 11th century cobbler-saint is regarded as the father of ‘*Vachana poetry*’- a form of rhythmic writing in Kannada. The word *Vachanas* literary means ‘that which is said’. Dohara Kakkach, a born Dalit wrote confessional poems. Among them six are still extant. Its present usage includes not only people of inferior caste, but all those people who are exploited on the basis of their frail position in society. This exploitation has been done politically, economically, and in the name of religion. Now it incorporates scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, poor peasants and women and even minority classes. Dalit is what the British colonizers used to call

schedule castes. Since 1930s, it has been used as Hindi and Marathi translations for all depressed and ignored people. In 1958, the term Dalit Literature was used at the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sanga in Mumbai by people like Bhimrao Ambedkar and Jyoba Phule. Ambedkar successfully fought against caste segregation and pleaded for Dalit rights. In 1970s, it is Dalit Panther's Movement established by Namdeo Dhasal which strengthened Dalit mission. Late on this mission has been materialized by a number of literary figures and social activists.

The English translation of Marathi Dalit writing has paved way for the establishment of a genre called Dalit Literature. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* edited by Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot and *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* edited by Arjun Dangle, both published in 1992 are behind the popularity of this new form of literature. Regarding the significance of Dalit Literature, the contemporary writer-social activist Arundhati Roy feels:

I do believe that in India we practice a form of apartheid that goes unnoticed by the rest of the world. And it is as important for Dalits to tell their stories as it has been for colonized to write their own histories. When Dalit Literature has blossomed and is in full stride, the contemporary Indian Literature's amazing ability to ignore the true brutality and ugliness of the society in which we live will be seen for what it is: bad literature. It will become irrelevant. (Quoted by MK Shamsudheen)

Life Of Omprakash Valmi

Omprakash Valmiki (1950-2013) was born in Uttar Pradesh district Muzzafarnagar. He is one of the masterminds in Dalit Literature and his masterpiece *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997) is a landmark in the whole gamut of its genre. Besides, Valmiki has three collections of poetry in his credit: *Sadiyan Ka Santaap* (1989), *Bus! Bahut Ho Chukka* (1997), and *Ab Aur Nahin* (2009). He also published two collections of short stories- *Salaam* (2000) and *Ghuspethige* (2004). He also wrote a book- *Dalit Saahitya Ka Saundaryshastra* (2001) and a history of his community known as *Saffai Devata* (2009) and a play –*Do Chera*.

Joothan: A Dalit's Life

Joothan: A Dalit's Life is an auto-narrative- a Hindi autobiography with historical consciousness and socio-cultural realism. The book unravels the trials and tribulations of Dalit community known as Chuhru belonging to Uttar Pradesh. The author provides a firsthand experience of caste discrimination and social segregation with masterly strokes of art and language, and traces his own journey from a social underdog to a somewhat self-assured person. The words explicitly and aptly reveal the angst of the writer and this agony is not only of his own but the general Dalit community suffering adversely across the country. So the book may not be looked upon as a mere self-revelation, but the aesthetic-artistic manifestation of Dalit life. At the very outset of the book, the author says: "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, shared by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creation. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionless towards Dalit". He feels that such a pain and pangs are not to be endured anymore passively, and equips himself with determination and confidence to counter the oppression of domineering people. Omprakash Valmiki uses writing as a powerful and efficacious weapon to retard the tyrannical masters of flawed social order. *Joothan; A Dalit's Life* proves a milestone in boasting the crushed Dalit's confidence and inspired a number of writers after its publication who have written and reacted in the same mode. Thus, the auto-narratives have become a favorite genre of Dalit writers and the same has been considered authentic and reliable.

The denotation of the word '*joothan*' is scraps of food or left over remnant of eatables meant for Dalits. The people of Dalit community have to rely on and to relish this '*joothan*'. The connotation of the term is broad and grave. It signifies angst, humiliation and privation of the author's community. The writer gives lucid and detailed expatiation of receiving, preserving and consuming '*joothan*'. The bitter memories of his early life of the same thing pinch him with fresh pain and abasement at the present moment. Valmiki recounts an event of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi daughter's marriage in a very poignant way in order to reveal the actual position of his community. His parents work there for about twelve days before the wedding and he along with his sister Maya is also there with great expectation that they would be provided with the same food and sweets served to the *barat* and other guests. When all the people leave after the banquet, Valmiki's mother asks Sukhdev Singh Tyagi: "Chowdhriji, all of your guests have

eaten and gone... please put something on the pattal (leaf plate) for my children. They too have waited for this day”. The so called upper caste master replies in a very humiliating manner: “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”. These words have left an indelible impact on the psyche of the author and he still feels as if a knife is piercing his heart whenever he thinks over it. Such is the mistreatment that this Dalit community receives at the hands of caste conscious Hindu community. The same maintains and perpetuates a gap between upper castes and lower castes, touchables and untouchables. And the same cause is given effect in the form of writing known as narratives of pain as it is branded due to the miseries and hardships Dalits undergo.

The Dalit narratives are mostly evaluated by the criteria propounded by black writers and feminist theorists in their autobiographies. These autobiographies are unlike the subjective accounts of renowned people who represent themselves as prototypes of their communities. The ‘self-narratives’ of all the marginalized people deal with common places employing common style comprehensive to one and all. Their purpose is to appeal the conscience of the oppressors and to promote the consciousness of oppressed. They use writing to assert their identity and develop integrity among their own people. These autobiographies do not highlight the writers’ uniqueness and individual achievement, but ‘self’ is seen in relation to public and the voice of the public finds its fulfillment in ‘self’. *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* though written by untouchable is not merely for the untouchables but for universal reading. It fosters the courage by mirroring the sense of outrage which the writer has witnessed in his life. Unlike standard tragic story which shows protagonist’s journey from happiness to misery, *Joothan: A Dalits Life* provides a glimpse of the writer’s life from a non-entity person to an identity attained man. It vindicates that even subaltern Dalits can speak and assert against the aggression inflicted upon them by domineering power holders.

Omprakash Valmiki plainly describes the wretched conditions of the Chuhra community who are badly suffering for the basic requirement of life. They are extremely deprived and poor, has no amenities and facilities, and share the slums and fissures of animals. They labour hard for the upper class named Tyagis who have not an iota of compassion for them. For the writer to be born untouchable is a great sin: “untouchability was 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 gets contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as humans”(2). Even in schools, the writer does not get relief from the maltreatment. He has been teased and tortured by upper class boys, teachers and heads of the institutions. Instead of learning, sweeping and cleaning premises is considered his right work. It is thought his duty and responsibility. Due to all this, Dalits feel that it is squandering of time and energy to enroll their children in schools and so regarding Valmiki’s schooling, they used to say: “what is the point of sending him to school? When has a crow become swan”(6). It indicates the helplessness of the Dalit people who are abused and pained at every step of life. But the writer is lucky enough to be loved and encouraged by his family and ultimately strengthens his nerves to fight against the injustice being wrought upon his people.

The social discrimination is wide spread in every corner of the society. Right from the childhood, the writer has seen the caste discrimination and segregation. During his school days, he has been taunted at by his class mates and teachers. He feels that one can overcome the problem of poverty and change the position, but it is impossible to expunge the caste stigma. He writes: “During the examination, he could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The person would pour water from way high up; lest our hands touch the glass” (16). But this negative treatment does not dishearten the author. He shows enthusiasm for the study and consciousness for the significance of education. He enlightens and equips himself with the armament of reading and writing. He is voracious reader of legendary writers like Prem Chand, Saratchandra and Radindernath Tygore. These people have ripened him intellectually and enhanced his understanding of life. His distinctive results boast his self-assurance and bestow upon him indomitable spirit of assertion. Regarding the practice of untouchability and caste consciousness in India, he gives a meticulous demonstration of his childhood experience. He is regularly and excruciatingly haunted by the humiliation and disgrace at the hands of upper caste people. He is smouldering with the acute pain of exclusion on the grand occasions in school:

I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions, I stood like a spectator. During the functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for play, I too wished for a role, but I always had to stand outside the door. The so called

descendent of gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door”(16).

The vicissitudes of the narrator's life goes on consistently. On some occasions, he feels that his education and talent bring him laurels and honour, but at times he is encircled by the same gloom and darkness which is the destiny of his community. On the occasion of his brilliant success in high school examination, he is jubilant on seeing his name in newspaper, and more so when a highbrow Tyagi felicitates him. It raises his level of confidence and makes him feel dignified and decent person. But unfortunately when he reaches the twelfth standard, he is again caught up with ill-treatment of chemistry teacher, Braylal who never permits the writer to enter the lab for practical lessons. The teacher throws cold water on all his hopes to go ahead with distinction: “I felt that whenever I went to the lab for practicals, Braylal would keep me out on some pretext or the other”(65). This leads writer to failure in Chemistry, though he secures creditable percentage in other subjects. The incident adversely affects his psyche and he loses all zeal and zest for study and is overpowered by the undiminished darkness.

At DAV College in Dehradun which he joins on the insistence of his elder brother Jasbir, Valmiki comes to know about the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar by reading his biography. The struggle of Dr. Ambedkar to uproot the untouchability and abrogate caste segregation ignites his dormant hope and strengthens his determination. In Dehradun, the writer also undergoes trials and tribulations created by Hindu boys. But such a pain and distress is expiated by his job in the Ordnance Factory as an apprentice. When his father is informed about it, he takes it positively: “at last you have escaped past” (78). But the narrator knows that one cannot get rid of the complicated maze of casteism practised by upper class society, and it follows like a shadow up to one's end. Later on when the author goes to Bombay for a job, he gets transformed by the new atmosphere and experience. He interacts there with people belonging to various corners of the nation. He reads foreign writers like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Hemmingway, Oscar Wilde and others. These writers have widened the mental horizon of Valmiki and have taught him the knack of writing. In Bombay, he also reads Dalit Literature and its socio-cultural background. The works of Namdeo Dhasal, Vaman Nimbalkar and Daya Pawar have aroused in him a spirit to campaign for the cause of Dalit underdogs and for their privileges. The narrator sums up the Dalit predicament across the country in a very plain and striking manner:

My village was divided along lines of touchability and untouchability. The situation was very bad in Dehradun and in Utter Pradesh in general at times when I saw well-educated people in a metropolitan city like Bambay indulging in such behavior, I felt a fountain of hot lava erupting within me.(95)

Omprakash Valmiki provides a panoramic view of filthy Indian caste system which is rampant everywhere. He refers to his love affair with a Brahmin girl named Savita who also reciprocates his passion by taking him for a boy of the same community as his surname Valmiki signifies. When Savita afterwards comes to know the reality, she jilts him and leaves Valmiki a dejected person. The incident works as an epiphany for him and he becomes radiant and conscious absolutely. His involvement in Dalit movement becomes more and more profound. He actively participates for the self-assurance and self reliance of Dalits. He along with Dalit Panthers tries to realize the dreams of Ambedkar- to work for setup free from all social discriminations. In a nut shell, Valmiki asserts in the peroration of the book that casteism is still beloved and practiced in India with consciousness: “‘caste’ is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, ‘caste’ determines his or her destiny. Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in ones control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household?”(134).

Conclusion

Thus, Omprakash Valmiki’s auto-narrative *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* is not merely self-revelation and a record of his individual growth, but a socio-political assertion. He not only protests against caste discrimination, but also exposes the false claims of the documents believing that India is an egalitarian and social democratic state where there is not any type of discrimination and segregation. The book catches the crucial moments of modern India that struggles to go side by side with the advanced nations, but is not able to purge itself from the disgrace of social oppression inflicted on marginalized populace. It raises voice of unheard people and works as a scripture for the derailed and demoralized Hindu society. Valmiki encourages his community with positive approach by infusing a spirit of determination to fight for their privileged space and identity. He has got critical acclamation from the people of different thoughts, and his book has proved a milestone in the development of Dalit Literature

and in igniting Dalit consciousness regarding their treatment in socio-political scenario. Through the depiction of self-hood, the autobiography promotes the awareness in Dalit community at the larger scale. Valmiki makes his subjectivity an objective tool by creating a dialogue with other writers and by involving shifting scene with people of different temperament and different places. Therefore, the book can be evaluated diversely and from multiple perspectives by keeping in view its elastic texture.

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