

Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan : A narrative of caste oppression

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ABSTRACT :

Joothan is an autobiography of Dalit's life. It was published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003. Joothan is related to Hindi word "jootha" which means scraps of food left on a plate. The writer has mirrored India's untouchable have been forced to accept and eat joothan for century and encapsulates the pain of humiliation and poverty of a community forced to live at the bottom of Indian society. More than 65 years of independence and the condition of Dalits are not completely changed. In this narrative Omprakash Valmiki has narrated his own personal experience since he was born. His narrative is the depiction of not only his own personal experience but that of his community also. This paper is an attempt to bring out the main theme of this narrative. Moreover it has also been tried to find out the relevance of the title of this autobiography in the context of the experience narrated here.

KEYWORDS : Joothan, Oppression, Narrative, Dalit, Education, Caste, Food, Respect

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Joothan is an autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki who was a Dalit writer. Omprakash Valmiki has explained his bitter experiences effectively which he had faced in his whole life. He wanted to make one thing clear that untouchability should be removed from the our society and he tried his best by narrating his own bitter experiences as Dalit.

Omprakash Valmiki's family lived in Chuhra basti with five brothers and one sister. Two chacha (uncle), one tau (uncle) and his family also lived in the same basti but separately. Everyone in the family worked but they did not get food twice in a day. They were passing their life with full of pain and humiliation. They did all sort of work for the Tagas, including cleaning, agricultural work and general labour. The chuhras were not seen as human. Omprakash Valmiki defined 'Jootha' in his autobiography :

"During a wedding, when the guests and the baratis, those who had accompanied the bridegroom as members of his party, were eating

their meals, the chuhras would sit outside with huge baskets. After the bridegroom's party had eaten, the dirty pattals, or leaf plates, were put in the chuhras' baskets, which they took home, to save the joothan that was sticking to them." (9)

A caste is a division of society based on occupation and family lineage. Hindu caste system recognized four distinct classes or divisions among the people based on criteria and enforced it through a rigid code of conduct that was specific to each class in the dharmashastras (law books) of the later Vedic period. (i) Brahmins, (ii) Kshatriyas, (iii) Vaisyas and (iv) Shudras.

Untouchables were considered so impure that any contact with them by caste member would contaminate the other person. The caste - person would have to bathe and wash his or her clothing immediately. Untouchables could not even eat in the same room as caste members. They did that work which no-one else would do, like scavenging animal carcasses, leather work, or killing rats and other pests.

Arundhati Roy has also explained the problem of Dalits and Untouchability in her novel The God of Small Things in 1997. Velutha, the son of Vellay Pepen who plucked coconuts from the tree is an untouchable. Pappaachi would not allow Paravans into the house. They were not allowed to touch anything.

Dalit is a Sanskrit word which is very common among the people not only now but before the independence of India. Dalit is the name given to the lowest caste people in Indian society. In Sanskrit, dalit means "divided", "broken" and "oppressed". Those born into this caste were traditionally limited jobs. Arjun Dangle defined dalit in his book :

"Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experience of joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science thus finally ending as revolutionary." (Dangle, 267)

Omprakash Valmiki was taught alphabet by Master Sewak Masahi in open air school. Master was a Christian so he could sit with the children of the chuhras. Being a Dalit was difficult to get education as well as respect. His father wanted him to admit in the school but the school's teachers did not want him to teach because of his caste. But his father kept on going to school for the admission of Valmiki and the teacher used to say comes tomorrow. After some days Master Har

Phool Singh admitted him in the school. India got freedom eight years ago. And the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables. He sat away from the others in the class because upper caste children did not want to sit with him. The children of Tyagis would tease him by calling "chuhre ka" and they beat him sometimes without any reason. The boys would beat him any case as well as teachers. He had two friends, Ram Singh and Sukkhan Singh. Ram Singh was a Chamar and Sukkhan Singh was Jhinwar. They all three were good in studies but their low caste background dogged them at every step. After being an intelligent student Valmiki treated in school very badly. In other words we can say as bad as donkey. He was studying to get respect but he did not imagine that the fault was being such a lower caste Dalit.

To illustrate these points the following conversation of Omprakash Valmiki with the Head Master can be mentioned:

"One day the master Kaliram called me to his room and asked: 'Abey, what is your name?'

'Omprakash, I answered slowly and fearfully. Children used to feel scared just encountering the headmaster. The entire school was terrified of him.

'Chuhre ka?' Headmaster threw his second question at me.
'Ji.'

'All right See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation.
Go get to it.' (4)

Omprakash Valmiki had strong desire for study. So he bore this much pain. He completed his primary school and wanted to study in higher school but their family was facing the problem of food. Because his elder brother died without proper medication. He was found of study everybody knew it in his family. But his family members were helpless. His Bhabhi (sister in law) came with her ornament which was very important for her. Because that ornament was associated with the memories of her marriage. When he was admitted in High School that was also painful experience. He did not attend any single class first three days. Because his teacher gave him work to sweep the school. Once his father was passing through the school and he saw his son with a broom and full of dust. And also his eyes were full of tears. His father

called him 'Munshiji, what are you doing? And his father was very angry and took him from the school. He told the thing which was going on in school to other upper caste people but they did not want untouchable people to get educated. Also the Tyagis were telling it was useless to study by Dalits. They did not tell anything to the teacher only they blamed Valmiki's father. They said that it was your fault that you sent your son school. No one said that a teacher should be polite enough to make students comfortable.

There was a time when he had lost his faith in God. He went with his friend who was son of 'Dhobi' (washer man) to iron his uniform. But his father saw them and told, 'we don't wash the clothes of the Chura-Chamars. Nor do we iron them? (17)

If we iron your clothes, the upper caste people won't give me their cloths than how will we survive.' After listening this Valmiki was too much upset.

"Along with science, Brajpal Singh was also teaching us mathematics now. One day before the annual examination, he announced in the class, 'If any student wants to ask me anything, don't hesitate. You can drop in at my house. I want that every student in my class gets high marks.'

On day I went to the staff room and told him I needed help with maths. He avoided me. He asked me to come to his house next Sunday. On Sunday morning I went to his house with my book and papers. He lived on the top floor of a two-storey house. His jija, the owner of the house, lived on the ground floor. When I got there, he and his wife were cooking something in the kitchen. As soon as he saw me, he said, 'Put your books on the ledge. There is some wheat in this canister. Go get it ground. By then I will be free.' (56,56)

This paragraph from the book named Jhoothan which shows how the teacher gets his work done by students. The teacher called Omprakash Valmiki on Sunday to solve his Maths problem. But instead of solving the problem he gave him a personal work to do. The work was not hard but the canister was heavy. He carried the canister to the mill. He came back from the mill but the teacher was not in the house. He waited for the teacher for a long time. But the teacher did not come back. It means the teacher was busy, no it was student's caste which made the teacher uninterested. The teacher simply wasted Omprakash Valmiki's time and he got no benefit. After this bad experience he left to

chase teachers like these. He had not any problem for doing teacher's personal work. But he needed his help, he could not help him. He solved those problems of Maths with the help of his friend Sukkhan Singh. It was very difficult for Dalit to get educated at that time. The upper caste people did not want them to get educated. They wanted Dalit works for them only. There was no importance of Dalit's time. Omprakash also explained a painful thing during examination. Untouchables were not allowed to drink water during examination. It is very difficult to concentrate on writing being thirsty :

'During the examination we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass.' (16)

Omprakash Valmiki was not only a man who suffered for being untouchable there were a lot of people who are educated than also treated as an animal. His father thought that when my son will be educated, he will get as much respect as the higher caste people were getting. But he could not know the reality of caste identity. He forgot the value of identity which made people more remarkable than education. But Omprakash Valmiki understood it during his study period. The identity which he got by birth it will not give him respectful life even after being more educated.

Mulk Raj Anand has shown the real picture of society in his novel 'Untouchable'. In this novel he has portrayed a picture of sweeper boy Bakha who is untouchable. There was an incident at the Hockey match when Bakha saves a small boy from being crushed in a stampede. And he takes him to his home. But the mother of the child instead of thanking Bakha for this admirable job, she scolds him and says that it is he who must have been the root of the trouble. That is to say fault or no fault the untouchables had to receive the abuse. The lower caste people are suffering because they are outcaste by birth. But the people of upper caste like Pandit Kali Nath enjoy the touch of Dalit girls. Anand exposes double standard or double dealing people in his novel nicely.

There was a bad thing in our society loss of humanity which is also available now. Upper caste people try to destroy lower caste. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public. The government has done so many things for betterment of Dalit as well as lower caste. But these are not implemented properly. According to the news paper Dalits are hurt everywhere in the country. The upper caste

people are treating them less than animal. Humanity is dying every day in the country by the name of caste. Which shows the value of humanity is nothing in our society. Dalits and Untouchable are always beaten by Hindus in our society. It comes in news. Their girls are raped. Their houses are burnt. Hindus are doing on the name or religion : 'Hinduism has made every attempt to destroy Dalitbahujan culture and civilization, It has not succeeded.' (Ilaiah 127)

Omprakash Valmiki has written many bitter experiences which he had to face during his childhood and youth simply because of his caste. He has made clear that the life of Dalits were full of suffering in his autobiography because of the fact that they were born in particular caste. In comparison to Dalit community, the people of higher caste like Brahmins and Chatriyas were easy going. Omprakash Valmiki has shown that even the education could not change the caste. There was a very good thing in Dalits which was also not in higher class. That was remarriage of widow. And if you think you will find the condition of Dalits women were far better than upper class women. Because they were free to work out side and they did it. They did house work as well as outside work which helped them to get some money or grain. That was also helpful for their family. Mulk Raj Anand exposed double dealing people in his novel 'Untouchable'. He handled nicely the problem of Dalits through Bakha. Dalit Literature is a very good medium to show their cruelties.

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