
The Trajectory of Socio-cultural Discourse in Om Prakash Valmiki's Joothan

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Abstract

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* identifies itself as a part of Dalit literature and makes him as a writer of Dalit consciousness. This book is a report card on the conditions of people who are called untouchables. In his preface, Valmiki writes that his autobiography presents those facts which could not find a place in Literature. The pain which he tasted by taking birth in the caste of *Chuhra* was never shown in the annals of Hindi Literature in such a way as he has prepared a new ground. Although, Hindi writers with a few poems and short stories have mentioned tragic characters, yet Dalit representation is chiefly absent from contemporary Hindi Literature.

Keywords- Untouchability, Hatred, Discrimination, Education, Corruption, Rebellion, Oppression, Exploitation, Awareness.

Introduction

Omprakash Valmiki is one of those unfortunate writers who struggled to reach their readers. Arun Prabha Mukherjee translated his autobiography, *Joothan* from Hindi into English. This book is a journey of a poor, unfortunate untouchable who suffers to have an honorable place as a writer and a critic. Because of being a Dalit by birth, he was humiliated and abused everywhere. But he was very lucky to be born in a supportive family where everybody cared for him. His family encouraged him to face the dangers of being a Dalit. Valmiki was conscious of his studies since his childhood up to the last moment of his retirement from the Government

ordnance factory. He remained deprived of his place in society. Consequently, he died of Cancer in Dehradun on November 17, 2013.

The title exposes the pain, humiliation, and poverty of the particular group, which is forced to live a disgraceful life. Joothan refers to pieces of food left on a plate or thrown before animals. This autobiography shows the real face of Indian society where low caste people are treated like animals. Valmiki's family and the people belonging to his caste had been collecting,

preserving, and eating Joothan since ages. He could not get rid of the days when he guarded the drying joothan against crows and chickens, such as the pieces of pooris that were collected from the pattalsand and was dried on a charpati in the sun. "Often I would be placed on guard duty because the drying pooris attracted crows, hen and dogs. Even a moment's lapse and the pooris would vanish. Hence, one would have to sit near the cot with a stick in hand." (Valmiki 9)

This task of preserving joothan burnt him with pain and humiliations. In school, he was not allowed to drink water. His family had to clean open place with agricultural work. They were not paid money except a little grain and the joothan which were placed in their baskets. He writes:

To compensate us for all this work, we got five seers of grain per two animals; that is, about two and a half kilos of grain each. Taga household with ten animals gave twenty-five seers of grains a year – about twelve to fifteen kilos, a leftover roti at noon every day, specially made by mixing the flour with husk since it was for the Chuhras. Sometimes the joothan, the scraps, would also be put in the basket with rotis for us. (Valmiki 9)

Although the plot of Joothan is simple in content and linear in form, yet it is one of the best experimental plots in the primary stage of Indian novel in English. Joothan is an impassioned plea for social cause. Its purpose is to expose the evil of untouchability and to analyze its social, moral, economic, psychological and religious aspects. They create structural unity to the plot. The plot of Joothan is compact and coherent. The novel follows the three Aristotelian unities and records events with the life of Omprakash, focusing the miserable condition of the untouchables who form the lower stratum of society.

Omprakash Valmiki was the youngest of all five brothers of Chotan Lal and Mukundi. His parents with four sons worked hard for their livelihood. He was lucky to have the privilege of going to school. It was necessary for

all the Chuhras to work for the Hindu Tagas and Muslim Tagas who belonged to upper caste. Readers acknowledge that the situation is not the result of natural calamity and phenomenon but the people belonging to upper caste created barrier to establish themselves as superiors.

The people belonging to Chuhras had to work for the Tagas. They were addressed as Chuhras or Abbey Chuhre rather than by their names and it was utterly intolerable. This inhuman treatment which forced him to search for a clear definition and an answer for the problem. Valmiki had to face ill-treatment at school too. Most of the students and teachers belonged to the one of the upper castes. They harassed him, mocked him and beat him on the name of caste. He was not allowed to drink water and had to cup his hands or stand near the hand pump. Chuhras were supposed to dispose the dead cattle and collect the skin of the animal and sold it at the market. He had to do this job just for the sake of a bit of money. All these incidents happened in his early days. Somehow, with the assistance of his family, Valmiki became successful in achieving his education. One day his father took him to Basic Primary School and requested Master Phool Singh to teach his child. The teacher was very kind and asked him to come the next day. He kept on going to school and finally he was admitted to school. Although, the doors of the government schools were opened for untouchables, yet the mentality of ordinary people was the same. He was not allowed to sit with other students. Sometimes, he had to sit right near the door like a servant. Children of the Tyagris called him Chhure Ke. Sometimes they beat him without any reason. All types of tricks were applied on him so that he might leave his study.

Ram Singh was a Chamar and Sukhan Singh was a Jhinwar. They studied with him and were good at their studies. If they went wearing neat and new dresses, the Tyagris began mocking at them. They said: "Abey, Chuhre ka, he has come dressed in clothes' If one went wearing old and shabby clothes, then they said, 'Abey, Chuhre ke, get away from me, you stink.'" (Valmiki 3)

A teacher's ideal image had disappeared in his very childhood because they left no stone unturned in oppressing him. One day, headmaster Kaliram called him to his room and ordered to clean all the rooms and verandas. As soon as, he completed this work, he asked him to sweep the playground. Valmiki describes:

The playground was way larger than my small physique could handle and in cleaning it my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. Dust had gone inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying

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.(Valmiki 4)

On the second day, when he reached school, headmaster gave him the task of sweeping the school. He swept the whole day, thinking that he would go back to school the next day. Third day, the teacher again thundered: "Abey Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding ... your mother..."(Valmiki 5)

When Valmiki was in class 5th, he devoted himself to the study of books by Saratchandra, Premchand and Rabindranath Tagore. The books on Gandhi, Nehru, Vivekananda, Bose and other great personalities inspired him. In those books, he tried to

identify himself with the characters. He began to read novels and short stories before his mother in the faint light of wick lamp. It was a matter of great pleasure that "This was the beginning of my literary sensibility. Starting from Akha, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to Sur Sagar

, Perm Sagar, Sukh Sagar, Premchand's stories, Kissa Tota Maina... whatever I found, I, the son of an untouchable illiterate family, read to my mother."(Valmiki 6)

The discrimination, he faced from Hindu religion did not let him worship the Hindu Gods. At Janmashtmi, people in his basti worshipped Jaharpir and the spirits. During Deepawali, Mai Madaran was worshipped in place of goddess Lakshmi by offering a piglet with halwa and pooris. It was essential for everybody to worship God and Goddess. Pitaji and mother also worshipped but he did not have interest and sat outside that place. Sometimes, Pitaji became irritated on such humiliation. He sat silently without saying a single word and such discrimination broke him down.

Really, a teacher is worshipped in our society but Brajpal Singh, a Chemistry teacher spoiled his career. He was not allowed to attend the chemistry lab. He kept him out on some pretext. Consequently, he failed in lab tests. When he narrated his painful story before his elder brother, Jasbir who was working at the survey of India in Dehradun, he took him to Dehradun and admitted to DAV College. Pitaji did not give him any extra money because he took loan for his sister Maya's marriage. Jasbir's salary was also meagre.

Valmiki had to leave his school to make his career as an apprentice at the ordnance factory, Dehradun. He was very happy to decide that he did not move towards traditional occupation. The training period at Jabalpur

gave him an identity. He participated in dramas in the institute's auditorium. Hostel was free from the influences of caste. But he realized well that education and employment could not remove one's caste. Marathi Dalit literature and books on Buddhism helped him in flourishing ideals. He was shocked to find discrimination at the house of well-educated people who kept their utensils away from Mehers (The Untouchables in Maharashtra). This caste system made him destitute of the love of a Maharashtrian girl and finally, got married to Chandawho was beautiful and dutiful as well.

He enacted plays on stage on contemporary topics to spread awareness among the public. He actively participated in the Maharashtrian Dalit movement to change the name of the Marathwada University to Dr. Amedkar University. All the Dalits came under one roof and started movements to spread the ideals of Ambedkar and Karl Marx. He expressed their philosophy in his writings and plays. He became famous in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Valmiki beautifully used narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue. They confine his action from the beginning to the end. The language used

by Valmiki is very simple and easy. The speech and conversation of his family and villagers are in local dialect. Valmiki travelled from illiteracy to literacy and from the village to the city.

The novelist has very effectively portrayed the characters in the novels chiefly because he relies for his central issue and theme in the novel on the dialogues given to various characters. Almost all themes and issues in the novel are presented through the dialogues and actions, for this purpose he creates two sets of characters—the ones who speak the mind of the novelist—his father Chotan Lal, mother Mukundi, brothers Sukhbir, Jasbir and Janesar, Bhabhi, village Pradhan, wife Chanda, classmates Ramsingh, Sukkhan Singh, Shravan Kumar Shrama, Chandrapal Verma, Surjan Singh (the son of Valmiki's Mama), Chamanlal Tyagi (villager), editor of Hans Rajendra Yadav ji, teacher Yogendra Tyagi, Baburam Tyagi, Friends at the training institute, Jabalpur are the ones whom the novelist uses as his mouthpiece: Teachers, Phool Singh (Physical Education teacher), Omdatta Tyagi (English teacher), Brajpal Singh (Chemistry teacher), Narendra Kumar (Mathematics teacher) are another set of characters serving as a contrast to the former type. The issues of untouchability, progressive thinking, and corruption are debated and discussed through these sets of characters. These sets of characters serve as

comparison and contrast with respect to the above mentioned issues. The comparative and contrastive analyses of these two sets of characters reveal the novelist's mind and ideologies vis-à-vis these issues.

Thus, it was only education that brought a change in Omprakash Valmiki's life. All his experiences educated him how to gain self-reliance, self-confidence and personal development. The purpose of this English translation of Joothan is to convey the timbre of Valmiki's voice.

Work Cited

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