

A Study of the Portrayal of Dalit Experiences in Valmiki's *Joothan*

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Abstract:

The Dalit autobiographies reflect the veracity of Dalits. Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) is a commendable literary work as it vividly depicts the blatant realities of the life of Dalits in India. The Dalit autobiography is a document of social realism. The very title *Joothan* literally means the scraps of food left on a plate which indicates how Dalits are sidelined and deprived of basic amenities like food, shelter, clothing, educational and medical facilities. They are looked down upon and ill-treated like animals. In the light of the sociological dynamics of caste system in India, the paper studies how the certain privileged sections treat under privileged in the name of religion and institutionalized customs and traditions. The paper also vividly depicts the negative consequences of the hegemonic nature of caste system among human relations in Indian society.

The hegemonic nature of caste system in the autobiography is seen in not only in its creation but also in its fortification against Dalits with the help of other communities of the society.

Key Words: caste, ill-treatment, endogamy, education, food, gender relations, hegemony

Omprakash Valmiki is an Indian Dalit writer and poet. He comes from a village of Barla in the Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh which is the birth place of Dalits' political party called Bahujana Samajwadh Party (which is founded on the Ambedkar's ideology). Bahujana Samajwadh Party continues to play a major role in the present day Indian politics. Valmiki's concentrates on eradicating caste hegemony and social discrimination. He strongly upholds and affirms constitutional, egalitarian and democratic values. One of the salient features of all his literary works is his active involvement in the investigation of various blatant realities in the Indian society. The spirit of his investigation of various Dalit issues can be clearly seen in his prominent literary work titled *Joothan*. His main objective is to disclose negative consequences of caste system so that the privileged communities in India will pay attention to review and reform the existing norms of religion and traditions that dominate and exploit the weaker sections.

The autobiography *Joothan* is written in 1997. It is published in 2003. Originally, it is written in Hindi. However, it is later translated in to English by Arun Prabha Mukharjee. It succeeds in winning the New Indian Foundation as the best book award in 2004. Valmiki mentions in his preface that he pens his autobiography because of the continuous moral and intellectual encouragement given by Raj Kishoreji. Raj Kishoreji plans to publish a book called *Harijan se Dalit (From Harijana to Dalit)* in the 'Aaj Ke Prashan' series. The autobiography *Joothan* is actually a collection of all the episodes published in the book.

The very title *Joothan* actually emerges from a major incident from the life of the author. One day Valmiki's mother begs for remnant food from a dominant caste family and gets rejected. He

witnesses the humiliation of his mother by Shukhdev Singh, a dominant caste person of his village. At the wedding occasion of Shukhdev's daughter, narrator's mother works hard as a cleaner and asks for more than just left over from the wedding feast for her children. This makes Shukhdev angry and insults her,

You are taking a basket full 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 [11].

It is first time for Valmiki to see his mother becomes so angry. She empties the basket right there. She says to Sukhdev Singh, 'Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis (marriage guests) tomorrow morning' [11]. She gathers him and her sister and leaves like an arrow. Sukhdev Singh pounces on her to hit her, but his mother confronts him like a lioness against caste abuse.

Joothan refers to scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or animals. Dalits are forced to accept and eat *joothan* for centuries. The word encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced to live at the bottom of India's social pyramid, Chuhra community of Uttar Pradesh in particular, to which the author belongs. This incident raises fundamental question on the hunger problem in India. It is true that even after twenty centuries the elite ideology of India could not solve the hunger problem of Indian Dalits. This incident attributes caste discrimination as the bone of contention to this eternal problem.

Dalit labourers do all kinds of agricultural works to produce large quantities of grains for dominant castes but they remain foodless and hunger. Dominant castes exploit Dalit labourers by paying low wages but extract maximum work from them. Until crop reaches their houses they do not practice untouchability but once their houses are filled with them, they calculatedly and deliberately practice untouchability.

It is true that poverty and hunger is community based in India. Malnutrition and premature deaths are rampant among Dalits. Producers do not become consumers and consumers do not produce. Apart from denying the food to Dalits, In India the caste tradition determines what to eat and not. It is catastrophic and sarcastic that the division of vegetarian and non-vegetarian would bring a major division among children of the same mother. The strategic hold on weaker section of the people is also seen by free flow of alcohol on the streets. Alcohol is more available to Dalits than nutritious food. If Dalits are given their share of food properly, their social status quo would be elevated. The supply of nutritious food to Dalits definitely brings certain change in the wellbeing and thought process which finally results in questioning the injustice happening to them.

Author narrates the practice of untouchability even in the metropolitan city like Bombay. One day narrator meets Prof. Kamble at Kulkarni's house. Mrs. Kulkarni offers tea and while drinking tea, the author notices the cup offered to Kamble is different from the cups offered to the rest of them. Author enquires Sudama Patil who tells author that Brahmins of Maharashtra do not allow Mahars to touch their dishes and their dishes are kept separate. Mrs. Kulkarni comes to take the used cups of everybody but she does not take Kamble's cup inside. Unfortunately Savita defends the discrimination as right and justified by tradition. Savita treats SCs as uncultured and dirty. Author finds out that there is no difference between the people of Bombay and the villagers he lived with in relation to the practice of untouchability. He says:

My village was divided along lines of touchability and untouchability. The situation was very bad in Dehradun and in Uttar Pradesh in general at that timewhen I saw well-educated people in a

metropolitan city like Bombay indulging in such behaviour, I felt a fountain of hot lava erupting within me [95].

Author further narrates a heart melting incident that happened in his life regarding his relationship with a Brahmin family, Savita in particular. Kulkarni's family warmly welcomes him thinking that he is a Brahmin because of his surname. Author is given certain privileges and moreover Kulkarni's daughter Savita loves him. When Savita comes to know the author's social background, undergoes a world of change in her thinking, attitude and behaviour towards author which breaks the heart of the author. By this incident author perceives that how love, respectability, adoration, and privileges are all attained only if the person is born in an upper caste.

Valmiki laments that love, education, change of places and economic development cannot break the barriers of caste system. Caste system pollutes the love relationships among human beings. Honour killing is an example that can be located in any newspapers in India. Valmiki feels pity for Savita who herself unknowingly fell prey to caste system that is practiced and followed by herself and by her members of family. This is the best incident to show the danger of caste system that affects both the oppressed and oppressors. Savita followed caste system, practiced untouchability and became a silent victim to the caste system.

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