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## UNHEARD AND IGNORED VOICES IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S *JOOOTHAN*



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### **ABSTRACT**

*Dalit life is intensely painful, charred by experiences, experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. Dalits have grown up in a social order that is tremendously cruel and inhuman and compassionless towards Dalits. The present paper focuses on unheard and ignored voices in Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan. Joothan is Valmiki's first text in Hindi that identifies itself as a part of*

*Dalit literature. It examines a report card on the conditions of people who are now routinely called 'erstwhile untouchables' or 'ex-untouchables'. The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's Chuhra's community, which not only had to rely on Joothan but also relished it.*

### **KEYWORDS**

*Dalit, Social order, Untouchable, Humiliation and Marginalized.*

## RESEARCH PAPER

### Introduction

Dalit literature is considered to be the literature about the Dalits, an oppressed section in India under the Indian caste system. It forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. Dalit literature is uniquely Indian as it is a consequence of an evil caste system that existed for centuries in our country. It is a protest against all forms of exploitation based on caste, class, and gender. The Dalits are treated worse than animals by the high castes, which have been marginalized and oppressed in every possible way. Many Dalit writers like Bama Faustina, Baby Kamble and Arjun Dangle, Laxman Gaikwad, Waman Libalkar and Omprakash Valmiki, who have come up with their own stories of pain and suffering, narrating the anguish of Dalit life. Through struggle and Dalit writing, the trauma of Dalits expressed so delicately and clearly in a very straightforward way that these writings become a tool of resistance. Through Dalit writings the authors have clearly exposed the irrationality of those who believed in the theory of casteism and untouchability. Dalit writings became a matter of great interest after movements led by Mahatma Jotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

The paper highlights how Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki in *Joothan*, through his autobiography presents narratives of pain and unheard voices, expressed through his writings. The present paper is an attempt to study how Omprakash Valmiki voices the woes of the socially voiceless communities of India. His social concern is clearly projected in his autobiography *Joothan*. Omprakash Valmiki has realistically depicted the very sensitive issue of Dalits.

He is a forerunner among writers who laid the foundation of Dalit literature in Hindi. *Joothan* literally means the scraps of food left after eating the meals. This autobiography was first published in 1997 in Hindi and later was translated into English in 2003 by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, a professor of English at York University in Canada.

Omprakash Valmiki describes his life as an untouchable, or Dalit, in the newly independent India of the 1950s. The Hindi word, 'Joothan' literally means food left on an eater's plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle class, urban home. However, such food would only be characterized 'Joothan' if someone else besides the original eater were to eat it. India's untouchables have been forced to accept and eat *Joothan* for centuries, and the word encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced to live at the bottom of India's social pyramid.

Valmiki suffered a lot in his life time. He was born on 30th June 1950 at Barla District, Muzaffarnagar, UP in a low class Dalit family. He was the only person of his family who had ever gone to school. The country had become independent, when in July 1956 his father put him in the village primary school. Those were the times when Dalit children were not allowed to study in schools. He could remember all those teachers of his school who never addressed him by name, but by his caste. He has to face many problems in the school. The practice of untouchability was still in the school and he had to sit separately from the boys from the upper caste:

I had sit away from the others in the  
class, the too on the floor. The mat ran  
out before reaching the spot I sat on.  
Sometimes I would have to sit away  
behind everybody, right near the door.  
And the letters on the board from there  
seemed faded. (Valmiki 2-3)

As he belonged from a lower poor Dalit class, he was called 'Chuhre ka' (the son of a scavenger) by the students of the students and even his teachers also did not object it. He was beaten without any rhyme and reason at school. At the time of his examination, Dalit children were not allowed to drink water from the glasses as Omprakash Valmiki explains:

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.  
(Valmiki. 16)

It gives an insight into the saga of sufferings and oppression which he has undergone in various phases and places of his life. Omprakash Valmiki opens his autobiography with a graphic presentation of the residence of Chuhras community which is located at Taga, also called Tyagis, hegemonic group-privileged and dominating one. At the very outset of the autobiography Chuhras are depicted as living on the border of the village, separate from the upper caste people.

### **Oppression of Dalit's under caste based social system**

Valmiki portrays the social realities of his time in his autobiography. He writes; “one can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste”. With this statement Valmiki highlights the rigidity of the caste system in India that has resulted in the socio-economic oppression of thousands across India over centuries merely because of the “lesser caste” to which they belong.

Himself born in a desperately poor family in North India, the lowest caste in Indian society, a community of the illiterate untouchables, Omprakash Valmiki describes from his personal experiences the torments of the Dalit's who even have no right to fight for education or food but whose ordained job was to sweep the roads, clean the cattle barns, get shit off the floor, dispose of dead animals, work in the fields during the harvests and perform other physical labour for upper caste people including the Tyagi Brahmins. He describes how these people are subjected to an institutionalized slavery. *Joothan* of Omprakash Valmiki is an autobiography of the untouchable, by the untouchable and yet not merely for the untouchable but for everyone's reading. Omprakash Valmiki's narrative voice in *Joothan* brims with a quiet sense of outrage at what he had to endure as a human. *Joothan* is an autobiography that voices the demand of the Dalits for their rightful place in the society. Omprakash Valmiki uses his autobiography to show the plight of Dalits. His story is the voice from the heart of India that has been voiceless for countless generations. He has created an opening for our understanding and knowledge about people who are marginalized.

The condition of Dalit women is shown very miserable since the very beginning of the novel as there are no facilities of latrines; the newly married brides have to sit in the open to relieve themselves: “On the edge of the pond were the homes of Chuhras. All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edge of the pond to take a shit. Not just under the cover of darkness but even in daylight. The purdah observing Tyagi women, their faces covered with their saris, shawls around their shoulders, found relief in this ‘open air latrine’. They sat on Dabbowali's shores without worrying about decency exposing their private parts” (Valmiki 1). Chuhra community women have to shit in front of all people, without any hesitation. Dalit women have to follow rules of Tyagi upper caste women's restriction. While Dalit women shit whenever and wherever, those have to cover their face with their sari.

The ‘Chuhras’ worked for the Tagas, an upper class people who ill treated the ‘chuhras’ in a number of ways, Untouchability was one social evil which the writer confronted as he grew up. He says: “Untouchability was so 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 got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human” (Joothan 2).

### **Joothan as Dalit’s protest**

Dalits continue to face discrimination, economic deprivation, violence, and ridicule. Omprakash Valmiki shares his heroic struggle to survive a preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution and his transformation into a speaking subject under the influence of the great Dalit political leader, Dr.B. R. Ambedkar. A document of the long-silenced and long-denied sufferings of the Dalit's, *Joothan* is a major contribution to the archives of Dalit history and a manifesto for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness.

### **Expression of unheard voices through *Joothan***

Chuhras, the Dalits have no right to ask for their wages. Upper caste people call the people of this raze of scavengers, the ‘bhangi basti’, not by their names but by their caste as a general custom of the village. “We would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead, we got sworn at and abused” (Valmiki, 2). It indicates unheard and ignored voices of Chuhras community under Tyagis dominance.

Most significantly, though, Valmiki’s story is a voice from almost 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of India that has been voiceless for countless generations. Instead of following a linear pattern, the author moves from memory to memory, demonstrating how his present is deeply scarred by his past. Thus *Joothan* is not just a remembering of things past. It is the structuring of events in the life of a Dailt in such a way as to enable one to analyze and understand the social order that shaped the life. The narration encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community which had to rely on *Joothan* for satisfying their hunger. The autobiography is a reliving of his past. It tells how ‘his story’ becomes history. This reliving of the past burns him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present. As Arun Prabha Mukherjee has noted in the introduction "Valmiki moves from memory to memory, showing how the present is deeply scarred by his past despite the great distance he has travelled to get away from it" (xxxii). The author is making an attempt to reinterpret history. Through this reinterpretation, Valmiki voices the suppressed feelings of the marginalized Dalits of India. *Joothan* is also a remarkable record of a rare Indian journey, one that took a boy from extremely wretched socio-economic condition to prominence as an author as a social critic.

## **Conclusion**

The experiences and pain through which Chuhra community suffered may not be revealed without expression of their unheard and ignored voices through Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*. *Joothan* becomes a portrayal of Dalit's marginalization and inhuman oppression through which entire community suffered under dominance of upper caste. Omprakash Valmiki's voice is today recognized as an empowered voice of a writer who works on behalf of Dalits.

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