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### **VALMIKI'S JOOTHAN: A REAFFIRMATION OF HUMAN DIGNITY**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The word 'Dalit' is a beautiful word, because it transcends narrow national and sectarian frontiers. It is a beautiful word because it embraces the sufferings, frustrations, expectations and groaning of the entire cosmos. (Lal 1995: xiii)

Literature cannot be detached from life. It is the expression of life. Mathew Arnold calls literature the criticism of life. Life with all its shades becomes the raw material of literature. The Dalit literature is the product of modern age as the Afro-American literature sprang in the United States during the 20th century as a voice of protest against racial discrimination. Dalit literature is the reflection of the sorrows and protest of the downtrodden and the outcasts. In other words, Dalit literature is the voice of all those who are oppressed, depressed, suppressed, marginalized, segregated for ages for their rights as human beings.

Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary. (Dangle 1992: 264-65)

Autobiography has been the favorite genre of Dalit writers. Writers like Valmiki through his autobiography are embracing an identity that is born in a historic struggle to dismantle the caste system, responsible for their untouchable status, and to rebuild society on the principles of human dignity, equality and respect. Valmiki firmly asserts:

Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive, but also our true portrayals of wrongdoers. Dalit autobiographies will provide inspiration to our future generation (Valmiki: 20)

#### **KEY WORDS:**

transcends, marginalized, autobiography, dismantle, untouchable, portrayal.

## INTRODUCTION

Om Prakash Valmiki's celebrated memoir *Joothan* has become a saga of Dalit consciousness representing the annals of suffering, humiliation, mental anguish, self-realization, rebellion, retaliation and rehabilitation that are the life spirit of Dalit literature. The protagonist of this autobiography is the author himself but his personal experiences instead of being the story of self-glorification or self-confession represents the predicament of the whole community of Dalits. It is originally written in Hindi and later on it has been translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in English. Its title is retained even in its English translation for its meaningful implications. In Hindi, the word '*Joothan*' means the leftover food, given to the lower class of people to eat. It is in fact, a symbol of the demeaning existence, imposed on Dalits. According to the translator, the title reveals the story of pain, humiliation and poverty of down-trodden classes that have to depend on joothan for their survival and hence the title is quite apt realistically described how he used to wait for the collection of joothan at the house of a higher class man after some grand ceremony. This was regarded as a normal way of life and such a system was never challenged as it appeared correct even in the eyes of Dalits. Dalits followed this from the every childhood. But when a sensitive and thoughtful mind like Valmiki began to think in the light of modern social theories, he raised the voice of protest against it.

Valmiki himself bore the pains for being the member of the deprived class of society and his status as an untouchable kept on tormenting himself throughout. In spite of his consistent efforts to set himself free from the bondages of caste, he failed to get over the existing compassionless social order that did not allow an individual from the deprived classes to grow to his full stature. Though his hard work, sincere efforts proved fruitful in raising his economic standard but social upliftment as always been a dreamy idea for him. Due to deep rooted caste system he was unable to create his place amongst the members of privileged classes. In *Joothan* Valmiki has narrated his life story, full of agony and humiliation caused by hegemony of the upper class. In this he has made an attempt to expose the hollowness of the caste taboos and the social system on the basis of which an individual is discriminated so that his individuality gets crushed time and again throughout his life. In this manner he has raised his voice for human equality. In the words of Shobha Sinde "*Joothan* is one among a body of Dalit writings that is unified by an ideology, and agenda and a literary aesthetic. The text becomes a part of a social movement for equality and justice" (Critical Practice 97-98). In the preface of the autobiography Valmiki has expressed the painful psychological torments which he has to undergo while writing his life history. He writes:

'I had to relive all those miseries, torments, neglect, admonitions. I suffered a deep mental anguish while writing this book. How terribly painful was this unraveling of me, layer upon layer. In the process of writing these words, a lot has reminded unsaid" (Preface *Joothan* VII).

He was identified not by his name but by caste amongst the members of the elite privileged sections. The members of his community were called 'oe chuhre' or Abey chuhre' by them. They were branded as untouchables and were subjugated. They were deprived from touching any commodity or any person from the upper caste as it was believed that their touch might contaminate them. They were treated as a commodity "use them and then throw them away" (2). Even after the abolition of British Empire and establishment of democracy in India, the ordinary Indians were unable to set themselves free from the narrow colonial mentality based on caste discrimination.

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Education is the only tool which helps them to get rid of humiliation. The government made provisions for that but even the authorities of these government schools did not allow the children from these communities, to enroll there. The decision of Valmiki's father to get him admitted in government school indicates his progressive zeal and determination. He felt that by getting his son educated he would be uplifting the standard of his caste. Valmiki made personal efforts to make things suitable for him but at every step he had to experience humiliation. At school he was beaten by his fellow friends, punished and abused by his teacher for no reason except his caste. Sometimes he had to suppress his thirst since he was not allowed to touch the pitcher for fear of its being polluted. He was also admonished for his dress code no matter he wore neat and clean dress or the shabby ones. He was satirized, "this was our no win situation. We were humiliated whichever way we dressed" (3). Even the attitude of the headmaster was critical and it agonized Valmiki. The headmaster was the follower of caste-ridden society and it did not appeal to him that an untouchable should gain knowledge. It is, therefore he compelled Valmiki to do the work which suits his caste, instead of studying: "go sweep the whole playground.....Otherwise I will shove chillies up your Ares and throw you out of the school".

People like headmaster were not ready to accept any change in the set pattern of social framework. On the other hand, Dalits were becoming aware of their rights in independent India. So his father approached the headmaster and explained to him that education is no more a prerogative for the privileged class. In fact, every child has the right to be educated in free India.

Not only the social, even the economic condition of the untouchables laid hindrance in pursuing their education. Valmiki studied up to fifth standard but due to the deteriorating financial condition of the family he could not seek admission in sixth class. In such conditions his window bhabhi sold out her anklets to enable Valmiki in seeking admission in 6th class. Thus, the economic dependence of marginalized section on the elite classes is also responsible for their lower social standard. The humiliation and pain in school persisted as earlier. Due to his caste he had to bear in one way or the other. The permanent neglect and persistent humiliation made him an introvert but this proved a boon in disguise. He started reading books. Literary texts made an indelible impression on his mind and he began to think in a broader perspective. In the author's words, "These books had given voice to my muteness."

During his college days he made an effort to get admitted in Ordinance Factory, Dehradun, as an apprentice and later got job at the Ordinance Factory Training Institute, Khauaria and Jabalpur. He learnt chess and grew more interested in Marxist literature because Marxist ideology rejects the society divided on the basis of caste, class or creed. He also started writing poetry and one act plays. He acted and directed too. Nevertheless he was searching for an identity beyond the social code. Ambedkar and Marxist literature changed his consciousness so much that he said, "I have no interest in religion" (93). Humanity was the greatest religion in his eyes and so he got attracted towards Buddha's philosophy of human freedom according to which "The human being alone matters. It is karma and wisdom that takes a person towards transcendence" (100).

The deep rooted casteism made him suffer even in the metropolitan city. There lived a Kulkarni family whose daughter Savita fell in love with him in spite of his indifference towards her. One day Valmiki was shocked with their behavior towards a professor, Mr. Kamble. He was served with tea and snacks in different kind of dishes owing to his lower caste. He enquired Savita about her family's behavior towards Mr. Kamble. According to her, "SCs were uncultured dirty" (97). The moment he

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disclosed his identity based on caste, "suddenly the distance between us had increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our hearts" (98). On the persistent demand of his father to marry he married Chanda, thereby asserting his 'individuality' and 'identity'. He began to write poems and thus created new spaces beyond his caste's identity. He became a part of Dalit movement and his friends considered it a wrong decision. "The deeper my involvement became with the movement, the further many of my friends moved away from me". The Dalit movement gradually got impetus and Valmiki became an active participator to assert his individuality as a Dalit and gave strength to the movement.

No doubt education sharpened his sensibility, broadened his outlook, gave him a professional status in society, raised his standard of living but could not rid him off the bondage of caste system. Not only he but every Dalit faced the crisis of self-identity. When they were deprived of their right of being considered equal they tried to become a part of social order through pseudo identity through their changed caste name. Surname of Om Prakash, i.e., 'Valmiki' was often mocked by a majority of people and laid hindrances in his career. He was often the butt of their jokes. "What is so brave about that? After all he is a Chuhra. His surname spares as the hassle or asking what his caste is." (129).

During his stay at Maharashtra people often considered him a Brahmin by his 'Valmiki' surname but the moment they discovered its true meaning they avoided him. When his family used to suffer owing to his surname, the members including his wife raised their voice against using it. His wife's affirmation "If we had a child, I would definitely have made you change your surname" (126) disturbed and pained him a lot. Even the scholarly people changed it to Kahirwal and sometimes omitted Valmiki completely. The behavior was common amongst the ordinary people. "How so ever high an officer he may become, he cannot change his caste" (131-132).

Though Valmiki possessed all that may be possessed by any renowned man of savarn class but he could not achieve the social acceptability of his caste because of the time long established structure of society divided on the basis of caste. He puts this question before the readers, "Why is my caste my only identity? What historical reasons lie behind this hatred and malice? (134). The caste is decided on the basis of birth and not on the basis of profession or 'Karma', Philosophy of Karma was never applied on him and was bound to suffer the pangs of being born in low caste.

Freedom is the (highest) aesthetic value...Equality, freedom; justice and love are basic sentiments of people and society. They are many times more important than pleasure and beauty (Limballe: 115).

As a writer, Valmiki wanted to awaken us to the inequities of the social environment that had excluded him and millions like him, kept them 'outside the door'. Joothan's popularity with readers in India and abroad is living proof that Valmiki succeeded remarkably in breaking down the tall walls of denial that had occluded Dalits vision for so long. Valmiki eloquently says : 'We need an ongoing struggle and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change'. Joothan stridently asks for the promissory note, joining a chorus of Dalit voices that are demanding their rightful place under the sun. A manifesto for revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness, Joothan confronts us with difficult questions about our own humanity, and invites us to join the universal project of human liberation.

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