

**Ascriptive to accepted: The politics of identify in Omprakash Valmiki's Jhoothan**

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**Abstract:** Dalit autobiography like other marginalized autobiographies is based on communal identity. Dalit autobiographies lend an unstable attention to the individual ('I'). In Hindi autobiographies, like Omprakash Valmiki's 'Joothan' focalization jumps between Dalit friends, neighbours family and Community as a subject in its own rights. Om Prakash Valmiki's novel 'Joothan' is one of the most popular novels under the category dalit literature. The first thing which one needs to understand is - what is Dalit literature. Dr. Jugal Kishore Mishra in his paper "A Critical Study of Dalit Literature in India" simply defines it as 'writings that are about Dalits'. (Mishra, EASAS papers). Caste is such an important marker that teachers and the management deliberately connive to prevent a low caste student (Valmiki) from studying and changing his life. There is a tension between meritocracy and Valmiki's experiences as a Dalit student. The pain suffered due to humiliation, exclusion and physical violence are voiced in the autobiography but get ignored in public discourses. The protagonist faces a clash between the negative identities imposed on him from the outside (by the upper caste) and his positively self-ascribed identity. While for the Dalit writers and readers it's a unifying factor, for the non-Dalits this exposure means shame, accusation and a hope for change. There is another side to this fight for a 'positive' identity and recognition in society. In 'Joothan' Valmiki has successfully narrated his painful ordeals but he glosses over the inter-caste conflict among the Chamar and Bhangi Dalits. One can conclude from this that he is re-emphasizing the narrative agenda of the Dalit autobiography as being part of a larger movement of Dalit assertion. Generally referring to or focussing on divisions within the Dalit community is seen as counter-productive to larger interests. Hence we find most writers silent over this issue and the same is true of the writer of 'Joothan'.

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**Introduction:**

*Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki is one such work of Dalit literature, first published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003 (she added an excellent introduction in the 2007 edition). It is a memoir of growing up 'untouchable' starting in the 1950s outside a typical village in Uttar Pradesh. Told as a series of piercing vignettes, *Joothan* is also a remarkable record of a rare Indian journey, one that took a boy from extremely wretched socioeconomic conditions to prominence as an author and social critic.

Om Prakash Valmiki's novel 'Joothan' is one of the most popular novels under the category dalit literature. The first thing which one needs to understand is - what is Dalit literature. Dr. Jugal Kishore Mishra in his paper "A Critical Study of Dalit Literature in India" simply defines it as 'writings that are about Dalits'. (Mishra, EASAS papers). He discusses the origin of the word 'dalit' and says, "Dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution." (Mishra, EASAS papers) Dalit literature questioned mainstream literary theories and upper-caste ideologies and explored the neglected aspects of

life. Another thing which is highlighted from reading 'Joothan' is that in Dalit literature experience takes precedence over speculation. The writer does not talk of a fictitious event but something that has happened in his life. Hence, one can say that authenticity and liveliness are the hallmarks of Dalit literature.

It is literature that is considered as the mouthpiece of the society in which it is written. So, it was the power of words that empowered Dalits to put across their voice, so that people may understand what wrongs have been done to them. Words are used as weapons to express their trauma as well as anger against the wrongs and ill-treatment meted out to them. It is in the Dalit literature that all dogmas and prejudices related to casteism and man-made barriers are attacked. Dalit literature stretches back to times before Kabir and Ravidass. Dr. Ambedkar, Swami Achhutanand and Adi Hindu Mahasabha through their literary production articulated a community consciousness of Dalit people. All of them tried their best to create their identity. The book *Adi-Vansh Ka Danka* authored by Swamiji has the central argument that untouchables were embodiments of racial purity that they were indeed the earliest inhabitants of

Bharatvarsha and they did not discriminate amongst themselves as on the basis of birth, skin-colour or gender. Thus they hardly deserve to be looked down upon. Hindi Dalit poetry was inaugurated with Swamiji's composition, "Manusmriti Hamko Jala Rahi Hai" ("Manusmriti is Burning Us"): Day in and day out, This Manusmriti is burning us, burning us, Not letting us climb up, it is degrading us, degrading us, While Brahmins and Kshatriyas are allowed to rise and rise, "Wear your old clothes," for us is advice. (Singh: 4) In 1946 Mahatma Gyandas 'Vivek Bhushan' published a book of poems under the title *Bharat Ke Achhut* (India's Untouchables). These poems give expression to Dalit sufferings. The book of poems by Bihari Lal 'Harit', *Azadi Ki Larai* (The War of Independence), was published in 1947. It contains some of his most significant creation in one of which we find the lines:

Since 'Joothan' is an autobiographical work, one would certainly like to see what makes 'Joothan' different from other autobiographical writings. Another issue which will be looked at in this paper is how such writings become medium of political assertion and a space which contests issues of identity and resistance. In an autobiography, the normal trend is to glorify the 'self' and boast about the extraordinary quality of oneself. But that changes at the hands of a Dalit writer. (Singh, *The Economic Times*) When he/she writes, it's about denial of opportunities, about being forced to live a life worse than an animal's. The self becomes the representative of all other Dalits who were crushed and kept down because of their Dalit identity. Their entire life narrative gains a representative quality and imparts the true feeling of the sting they have suffered. The protagonist of the autobiography is, of course, the writer himself, but his personal experiences, instead of being mystically unique and individualist, encompasses the general condition of the whole Dalit community. (Singh, *The Economic Times*) They are called by their caste names like bhangi, chamar, chuhara, katik etc. and in essence these names stand for their state of untouchability and become a medium of abuse. Such writings contest caste-discrimination as well as the institutional claim that caste does not function as a social force in modern India.

Man is a product of society and societal rules play a pivotal role in shaping man's life. He behaves and acts in the society in which he is born and there are some people who try to come out that environment and want to live the way they want. Omprakash Valmiki's novel *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* was first published in Hindi in 1997. It was translated into English in 2003 by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. She is an English professor at York University in Canada. *Joothan* is generally called scraps of food left after

eating the meals. Omprakash Valmiki's novel *Joothan: A Dalits' Life* is a horrendous tale of the dalits. This novel is best known as an autobiography in the Dalit literature and it revolves around the real life pictures of the dalits. The novel does not seem relevant in the present contexts as the life of the dalits has been changed drastically these days and they are not discriminated to that extent as they are depicted in the novel but this novel seems relevant in the time when it was written. The novel has its setting in a village in Gaya district in Bihar. It is about Chuhra community and the people of this caste are involved in inferior types of jobs like sweeping, cleansing, leather-work, grass-cutting etc. These dalits have to live segregated from the upper caste people as has been depicted in the opening of the novel: "Our house was adjacent to Chandrabhan Taga's gher or cowshed. Next to it lived the families of Muslim weavers. Right in front of Chandrabhan Taga's gher was a little johri, a pond which was created as a partition of between the Chuhra's dwellings and the Village" (Valmiki 1). These people belong to the low caste and are the victim of poverty and starvation. They are not sure about two times meals and thus, they have to live from.

**Joothan:** *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki is a work of Dalit literature, first published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003. It is a memoir of growing up as an 'untouchable' starting in the 1950s outside a typical village in Uttar Pradesh. Told as a series of piercing vignettes, *Joothan* is also a remarkable record of a rare Indian journey, one that took a boy from extremely wretched socioeconomic conditions to prominence as an author and social critic. In his novel '*Joothan*', Valmiki described about the discrimination they had to face in the school at different points. He says: "During the examinations 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"(J16). Om Prakash Valmiki describes his life as an untouchable, or Dalit, in the newly independent India of the 1950s. "*Joothan*" refers to scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or animals. 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. Although untouchability was abolished in 1949, Dalits continued to face discrimination, economic deprivation, violence, and ridicule. Om Prakash Valmiki begins his autobiography by stating, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and

inhuman. And compassionate towards Dalits.” (Jvii) Valmiki describes how his entire community depends on the leftover food thrown out by the upper castes in return for their hard but unpaid work. The entire community had to depend on the mercy of the upper castes who, instead of paying labour, exploit them. The title of the autobiography ‘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. Valmiki, gives a detailed description of collecting, preserving and eating joothan. He was assigned the work to guard the drying joothan from crows and chickens. They used to relish the dried and reprocessed joothan. These memories of the past burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present. Throughout the novel, Valmiki repeatedly narrates his experiences of pain as exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. He writes, “I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions, I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door.” (J16)

**Dalit:** Dalit autobiography like other marginalized autobiographies is based on communal identity. Dalit autobiographies lend an unstable attention to the individual (‘I’). In Hindi autobiographies, like Omprakash Valmiki’s ‘Joothan’ focalization jumps between Dalit friends, neighbours family and Community as a subject in its own rights. The protagonist (I) and the Dalit community (We) are linked together without leading to any loss of meaning. The Protagonist’s own subjective autonomy is bound in a close relationship with his community. He feels not only his pain but also that of other members of his community. His personal success is interpreted as a success for the entire Dalit community and his father continually exhorts him to ‘improve his caste’. Despite the pressures exercised by family and friends, Valmiki is able to assert his personality. For ex., Valmiki opposes many traditions of his community during his marriage. (Valmiki 103)

In this regard Stephen Butterfield wrote, “The self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self.” (Mostern 51) And in these autobiographies there is a deep connection between the individual self and the communal self. Most of the Dalit writers have been physically segregated from their community due to their geographical relocation as well as due to education. Writing for them becomes one of the ways of re-establishing links with their own community. The same is true in the case of ‘Joothan’

where the autobiography is used to re-link the writer with his community. Margo Perkins and Barbara Harlow have discussed ways in which marginal narratives are used for political purposes. The same is true of Dalit autobiographies which have been used for political act. Perkins and Harlow see the narrative as the actual site of power struggle between the weak, marginalised voice and the institutionalised practices of the dominant group. Harlow writes,

“If resistance poetry challenged the dominant and hegemonic discourse of an occupying or colonizing power by attacking the symbolic foundations of that power and erecting symbolic structures of its own – resistance narratives go further in analyzing the relations of power which sustain the system of domination and exploitation.” (Harlow 85) Instead of facing subjugation at the hands of the powerful, resistance literature uses the language of the dominant to challenge their ideologies. Similarly, Valmiki uses the form of the autobiography to ask certain important questions related to identity. To what extent is caste the most important identity marker in one’s life? The true stories woven into autobiographies show how caste identity predominates all other identities and one’s caste brings innumerable obstacles into one’s life. Valmiki 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. When they go to school, the teachers and headmasters beat them up and force them to do menial jobs which have been traditionally associated with their caste. Shakespeare spoke of greatness being thrust upon people, but the caste system thrusts ‘smallness’ upon people and writings like ‘Joothan’ challenge such singularity and force the people in power and the upper castes to recognise the untouchables as human beings with similar feelings of love and hunger.

Caste’ is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, ‘caste’ determines his or her destiny. Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one’s control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard bearers of this country’s great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom.

Caste is such an important marker that teachers and the management deliberately connive to prevent a low caste student (Valmiki) from studying and changing his life. There is a tension between

meritocracy and Valmiki's experiences as a Dalit student. The pain suffered due to humiliation, exclusion and physical violence are voiced in the autobiography but get ignored in public discourses. The protagonist faces a clash between the negative identities imposed on him from the outside (by the upper caste) and his positively self-ascribed identity. While for the Dalit writers and readers it's a unifying factor, for the non-Dalits this exposure means shame, accusation and a hope for change.

There is another side to this fight for a 'positive' identity and recognition in society. In 'Joothan' Valmiki has successfully narrated his painful ordeals but he glosses over the inter-caste conflict among the Chamar and Bhangi Dalits. One can conclude from this that he is re-emphasizing the narrative agenda of the Dalit autobiography as being part of a larger movement of Dalit assertion. Generally referring to or focussing on divisions within the Dalit community is seen as counter-productive to larger interests. Hence we find most writers silent over this issue and the same is true of the writer of 'Joothan'.

Another question that one would like to study is the role of memory in such writings. Instead of following a linear pattern, the author moves from memory to memory, demonstrating how his present is deeply scarred by his past in spite of the distance he has traversed to become one of the prominent authors in Dalit literature. Inner anger is revealed through remembered incidents. Once Valmiki asked a question in class on an episode from the 'Mahabharata', he was rebuked and brutally thrashed by the teacher who 'created an epic on his (my) back with the swishes of his stick.' Remembering this incident, Valmiki writes:

"Reminding me of those hated days of hunger and hopelessness, this epic composed out of a feudalistic mentality is inscribed not just on my back but on each nerve of my brain."

He narrates other incidents of exploitation and torture committed by the people in power on the chamars, bhangis and other untouchables. In such cases even the government machinery sided with the people who had money power. Memory of such incidents leave Valmiki in pain and anger and from deep within his heart emerges the voice of protest and he says:

"I have not been able to forget these bitter memories. They flash in my mind like lightning every now and then. Why is it a crime to ask for the price of one's labour? Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins. As though we are not citizens of this country. The weak and the helpless have been suppressed for thousands of years, just in this manner. There is no accounting of how many

talents have been wiped out by deception and treachery."

Throughout the novel we find the Narrator, Omprakash burning with anger and this anger leads him to make several statements which highlight the underlying resistance in him. He contests caste discrimination. "Being born is not in control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household. Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country's great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into?" Valmiki repeatedly narrates the pain he suffered due to his exclusion from functions because of caste discrimination. At many places the readers can see that the feeling of resistance has been strengthened in Valmiki due to education. Education leads him to protest against customs which actually serve to 'demoralise' and 'degrade' a Dalit. One such custom Valmiki protests against is the practise among Dalits where the bridegrooms and brides go from door-to-door for salaam. Valmiki writes,

"It is caste pride that is behind this centuries-old custom. The deep chasm that divides the society is made even deeper by this custom. It is a conspiracy to trap us in the whirlpool of inferiority." The use of words like 'trap' and 'conspiracy' show that such practices did not take root because of personal choice but were forced upon the Dalits and it is education and the desire for 'recognition' and 'respect' which brings in them the ability to resist such degrading practices. At times it is the women folk who show strong resistance. In this regard Valmiki narrates an episode involving his mother. When his mother asked Sukhdev Singh Tyagi for food at his daughter's wedding, he told her,

"You are taking a basketful of joothan. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, Chuhri." His mother got angry and emptied the basket of joothan and never returned to Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's house and stopped taking their joothan. Such inner strength and will power gives birth to resistance.

This resistance leads educated ones, like Valmiki to question their religious identity. Valmiki refutes his Hindu identity:

"If I were really a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill me up with caste inferiority over the smallest things? I also wondered why does one have to be a Hindu to be a good human being...."

- showing that religion is not necessary for being a good human being. While in a feminist text religion is seen as a part of the dominant patriarchal structure which forces women to a secondary position, in Dalit writings it becomes a part of the ruling elite and an instrument of suppression for the untouchables.



Valmiki's resistance to the institutionalized practices of Hinduism can be read as resistance to the powerful and to instruments that perpetuate injustice in society.

Valmiki also tries to show the inability of the Dalits in resisting exploitation. As most of the residents of the Bhangi basti were deep in debt, they couldn't afford to protest against the injustices done to them. 'Most of the people of our basti suffered everything in silence. Honour and prestige had no meaning for them. Being threatened and controlled by the higher-ups was an everyday occurrence for the basti dwellers.' (19) The voice of protest could be heard when people from the basti started 'refusing wageless labour'. (29)

Autobiographies like 'Joothan' show the difficult struggle which Dalits undergo to get the right to speak for themselves. Generally it is the dominant group which speaks for the minority depriving them of their fundamental right. This was especially true of women autobiographies which has been defined and governed according to the interests of the dominant (here, male) community. In such cases the 'ability' or the 'right' of the marginalized group comes under immediate contestation. And Dalit writers have been forced to fight for their right to speak and redefine the boundaries of what can be said.

The author's objective doesn't stop at evoking compassion towards the oppressed Dalits in the mind of the reader but questions, "Why is my caste my only identity?" This one query leads the reader into introspection. In India caste has always defined the socio-political scenario of the country. Whether it is the debate on the reservation policy for government jobs and education to aid the socially and economically backward classes or political gimmickry, everything has an undertone of caste and religion. The mention of Caste, Community, and Religion on admission forms to school and colleges is one such example. Just being an Indian is rather insufficient to get one's basic rights. Isn't it ironical that with every step our country takes towards "development", the same issues crop up again and again?

The Dalit autobiographies serve a dissident space within the literary public where the Dalit writer can speak against untouchability and its existence in India. They are, as Paul Gilroy claimed for African American autobiographies, that is, a process of 'self-emancipation' in the creation of a 'dissident space' within the public sphere. At the same time, as Gilroy claims, they are also a process of 'self-creation' through the narration of a public persona. (Mostern 11). Thus, autobiography for Dalit writers serves as a means of reclaiming narrative authority over the construction of the Dalit self. While dominant Indian society has defined Dalits as 'inferior', 'polluted' and

so on, the Dalit writers re-write 'Dalit self-hood' and present it as 'oppressed', 'different' or 'inventive in the face of extreme exploitation'. Dalit autobiographies not only give entrance into public space through narrative based identity but also provide space to Dalit writers to regain control over the creation and meaning of 'Dalit selfhood.'

**Significances of the Novel Joothan:** The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community, which not only had to rely on Joothan but also relished it. Valmiki gives a detailed description of collecting, preserving and eating joothan. His memories of being assigned to guard the drying joothan from crows and chickens, and of his relishing the dried and reprocessed joothan burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present. Deep rooted in mental and physical persecution, this narrative highlights the exploitation by the upper class on the deprived section of the society. Lack of education, poverty, a lower economic status etc. was the reasons for their helplessness to protest. They were neglected all the fundamental and civil rights envisaged by the makers of our constitution. By drawing our attention to the typical village life and the atrocities against Dalits, the author himself imparts his own life experience. Even if the government has made provisions and given reservation for the lower caste people, they were devoid of such benefits. With the support and encouragement of his father, Valmiki attended school. The determination, the progressive quest and his zeal to learn didn't work here. At school, Valmiki was beaten up without any cause by his friends and insulted by the teachers.

#### **Conclusion:**

As Valmiki notes, Dalit writing is born out of brutal experiences. These are experiences shared by many Dalits across India. Dalit trauma has always been represented by others, while the victims have themselves, always been silent. The novel brings to visibility the life of Dalit lived in rural and semi-urban India, where caste is the single dominate factor.

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