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## **DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S**

### ***JOOOTHAN: A DALIT'S LIFE***

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### **Abstract**

Cultural plurality, heterogeneity, exploitation, suppression and untouchability have been the most recurring themes in Dalit autobiographies. This paper tries to purport and analyze Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography Joothan. There are very dark and gloomy pictures of Dalit communities in present day India. Dalits are fringed with their fundamental rights. They live a half-lived life which is worse than an animal. Dalits are considered the lowest class and they are considered to be intrinsically untouchable, impure, impious, unchaste and back ward. How Valmiki's or Chuhras have to live a marginalized life and how they have to do the slavery of the Thakurs, has been analyzed in it. Pitiably plight of Dalits and their marginalized position is one of the chief motifs in this paper. The devastating effects of the caste system and exploitation of Dalits have been explored in this paper. How the caste becomes the stumbling-block Dalits' lives and how they are deprived of their fundamental rights and how Dalit women have to live in suppression in astute poverty and how they are forced to accept their miseries as a part of their destiny; all these points have been analyzed in this paper.

### **Key-words**

Dalit Literature, Marginalization, Exploitation, Torture, Caste-system, Dalit Autobiographies



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Economical inequality, more or less has become is a grave issue and it has assumed diabolic dimensions these days. The position of Dalits is at the absolute bottom of our economical hierarchy. This economical gap produces the horrendous ignominy at any part of any country of the world. Some people have gone beyond on the boundary-line of caste, creed, race or religion but there are some of the *thekedars* of the religions also who consider their castes the supreme caste and look down upon the people whom they call Dalits, untouchables or means. In ancient times, the society was divided in four *Varnas* namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, it has been described in our ancient Hindu scriptures. Dalits are kept deprived of their fundamental rights. They are not allowed to participate in any social, educational, religious, educational or economic sphere. They are not allowed to live in the midst of elite society or high caste people. They have to live alienated or segregated in ding, dusty, muddy huts. Even their touch is considered inauspicious and their sight in the morning is considered a bad beginning of the day. Here is an effort to analyze the fifth *varna* named Dalit in Omprakash Valmiki' Dalit autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*.

*Joothan*" word literally means left-over or remaining of eaten food which is destined to be thrown to stray dogs or other animals. *Joothan* or the scraps of food is the dominant theme of this novel because the Dalit(Valmiki) people had to depend on this *Joothan* to satisfy their hunger. *Joothan* was first published in Hindi in 1997 by Omprakash Valmiki and it was translated into English in 2003 by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. She is a professor of English at York University in Canada. The whole description in the novel is based on the exploitation, marginalization and caste-discrimination. Violence and exploitation can be easily read in the autobiography. Sen opines that caste is "an ever-present feature of communal and sectarian violence" (Sen 209). There are illustrations where Dalit women are exploited. Firstly, they are Dalits, secondly women and thirdly marginalized, fourthly underprivileged. Thus, they had to face the discrimination at manifold levels as Ashalatha contends:

Dalits suffer from a three-fold oppression —

On account of gender because of existing patriarchy,

On account of their caste 'the untouchable',

Finally, on account of their class - as they hail from the poorest

and most marginalized communities (Ashalatha 254)



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The autobiographical narratives in this book have been given of a village in Gaya District in Bihar, India. It is based on the Swapper class or Chuhra caste. They had to live aloof and segregated from the village just because they belonged to the lowest class of the society: “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 are known by different names in India like sweepers, Chuhras, *bhangis* or Valmikis. These people clean the toilets, streets and sewers. They are kept deprived of all types of basic amenities. At the very outset, it has been written that The girls and women had not the facilities of toilets in their homes and that’s why they had to go in the open to relieve themselves when an old women, a girl or a newly-wedded bride:

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)

Omprakash Valmiki’s narrates about the hard life lived by these people in the *jhuggi* basti. The people of this caste had to work hard morning till evening and even after it they had to depend on the high caste people: “Our family lived in the Chuhra basti. Five brothers, one sister, two chachas, one tau lived separately. Everyone in the family did some other work. Even then we didn’t manage to get two decent meals a day.” (Valmiki 1-2) there are two castes which have been given prominent place in the narratives. First is high caste known as Tyagi, and second is sweeper or Valmiki caste. The people of this low caste were indulged in low paid occupations. They had to do the job of scavenging. They were washer-men, barbers, water-carriers or Chamars. They had to work under the high caste people. Their lives were like slaves and they had no right even to ask about their wages even after working throughout the day. If anyone mistakenly dared to ask about wages he would get either punishment or at least humiliation. That’s why all kept silent and thus, their family ran on the mercy of their masters: “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 swarm at and abused. Omprakash calls it not a life: “What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and

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night, the price of our sweat was just joothan”. (Valmiki 10) They had no identity of their own. Their identity was only their caste. These people were called not by the names but caste: “Oh Chuhre”. If the person was young or of the same age, then ‘Abe Chuhre’ was called.” (Valmiki 2)

A major problem that has been narrated in the book is the problem of untouchability. All these *bhangis* in this *jhuggi basti* were considered untouchables and their participation in any social, economical or cultural activity was strictly prohibited. Thus, caste is a big problem even these days. Dirks contend that caste is “the chilling sign that India’s relationship to history and tradition will necessary continue to be mediated by the colonial past” (Dirks 294) and Even their touch was the contamination or pollution and high caste people used to take bath again if mistakenly anyone touched them. They were not considered even human-beings:

Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch the dogs and cats or cows or buffaloes if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or pollution. The Chuhras were not seen as humans. (Valmiki 2)

Another problem for these children is that they are not allowed to go to school as the entry of these children was prohibited. A Christian priest Sewak Ram Munshi came to teach the children of this *bhangibasti*. Only boys were allowed to attend his class. It was only Omprakash who attended his classes as all of his brothers went to work. A bold step was taken in this village when Omprakash’s father, Chhotan Lal and his teacher, Sewak Ram Munshi took him to school for his admission. Omprakash’s father had to beg in front of the school teacher for his admission: “Materji, I will be forever in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two.” (Valmiki 2) First of all, he was put off for admission but when they went daily there then the teacher had to succumb. But after admission, the things were not so easy for Omprakash. He had to sit away from the other children. Even the other people of the village were not happy to see Omprakash’s going to school. Omprakash’s father had to listen much from the village people: “What is the point of sending him to school? When has a crow become a swan?” (Valmiki 6) Omprakash and other Dalit children had to wait for upper caste children to drink water from the tap in school as Dalit children were not allowed to touch water tap, “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.” (Valmiki 16)



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This caste discrimination was not only limited to schoolchildren or uneducated people of the village even the educated people were also favoured casteism. Teachers in the school were not happy to see Dalit Children in the school. One day school headmaster passes an order for Omprakash: “Go climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as mirror. It is often all, your family occupation” (Valmiki 4). This was not the end of his order. He starts ordering daily to clean school verandah and playground. There was not the least courtesy in his voice like a teacher and he abused him very badly: “Abey Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding...your mother... Go sweep the whole playground...otherwise I will shove chilies up your arse (anus) and throw you out of the school” (Valmiki 5). It was third day Omprakash had to do cleaning work in the school and that day coincidentally his father passes from that way. He becomes very angry to see his son sweeping the school. When his father raises his voice against this exploitation in the school, headmaster humiliates him also saying “The Chuhra wants him educated...Go, go...Otherwise I will have your bones broken.” (Valmiki 6)

The central theme around which the book is all about is the ‘joothan’ or ‘left over’. As these Dalits were not allowed to eat in the marriage occasions of high caste families rather they had to depend upon the left-over which is thrown in the pattals or plates. As they had no option left, *bhangis* used to collect this left-over food and ate it with pleasure:

After the baratis has eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in the Chuhras’ basket, which they took home to save the Joothan, sticking to them. The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweetmeats and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make them happy. The joothan was eaten with a relish. The bridegroom’s guests who didn’t leave enough scraps on the pattals were denounced as gluttons. (Valmiki 6)

It was the occasion of wedding of Sukhdev Tyagi’s daughter, Om’s mother begged for sweets from Sukhdev Tyagi so that she may feed her children. On this day Om was also with his mother and he feels extremely insulted by the reply of Sukhdev Singh when he pointed at the pattals and said: “You are having a basketful of joothan. And on the top of that you want food for your children. Don’t forget your place Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going.” (Valmiki 10-11) Omprakash could not forget these words throughout his life: “These words of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi’s penetrated my breast like a knife. (Valmiki 11)



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There was no any provision of hospital for Dalits and that's why Omprakash's elder brother died due to lack of medical facilities. Then his family had to face many financial problems. When there was no money at home then Om's bhabhi had to sell her only anklet for the fee of Omprakash so that he may study further. Omprakash had to face the problem of caste discrimination not only by the high caste people but the low caste people also make him realize that he belonged to a Dalit class. When one day he goes to a dhobi to get her clothes ironed, then even the washer man replies: "We don't wash the clothes of Chuhra-Chamars. Nor do we iron them. If we iron your clothes, then the Tagas won't get their clothes washed by us. We will lose our roti." (Valmiki 17) the problems of these low caste people aggravated when there was rainy season and the scavengers faced skin problems: "The feet became mangy. The space between the toes filled up with reddish sores started itch. Once they started to itch, they would itch nonstop." (Valmiki 19) There was no provision of fresh water in this basti as there was only one well for these people and the well was full of long worms during the rainy season. At that time, the life was very hard. The muddy houses of these people oozed and they had to spend whole night awaking. These people had to cook rice and mar (rice-water) when they took shelter in Mamraj Tyagi's house.

One day Omprakash's teacher was teaching the story from Mahabharata how Guru Dronacharya had to give floured mixed water to Asvatthama in his astute poverty. At this Om says that they also had to drink mar but why they are not mentioned in epics. At this his teacher beats him severely: "Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back... Chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya... Here take this, I will write an epic on your back" (Valmiki 23) Arvind Adiga also tells the story of exploitation in his novel *The White Tiger*: "The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian. That's what I ought to call my life's story" (Adiga 8)

After tenth class Omprakash attends Science classes. His Chemistry teacher does not like a Dalit student in his class. His teacher Brijpal did not allow him to attend lab classes on one or the other pretext: "I felt that whenever I went to the lab for practical. Brijpal would keep me out on some pretext or the other" (Valmiki 65). Again it was a big shock to Om when he failed in this exam due to his Chemistry teacher. It was the reason that Om had no interest in his studies thereafter. He joined college but had to leave his studies and admitted in an Ordnance Factory as apprentice. Soon he got job on the monthly salary of one hundred and seven rupees. Even after it he was fond of reading book. Valmiki writes: "Books were my greatest friends. They kept up my





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morale.” (Valmiki 79)The caste-discrimination does not spare Omprakash since his childhood. During his job in Mumbai also he faces the same problem.At other places also he faces the same problem:The situation was very bad in Dehradun and in Uttar Pradesh in general at time when 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”. (Valmiki 95)

Conclusively, it can be inferred that OmprakashValmiki’s *Joothan* is a heart-rending tale of Dalit discrimination. The roots of this discrimination are very deep as even the well educated people also are the part of this system. Now the mentality of the people is changing and a revolutionary era is going to begin as Bijender Singh opines: “The Brahmin cult should be uprooted from one’s mind. Now the era of Gandhism is over and the revolution era has begun to uproot this evil—the era of Ambedkarism. Another point to keep in mind is, if ‘Black is beautiful’ then ‘Dalit is also dignified’. So, let us take pride being Dalit or marginalized class of the world because many of the gods and great persons also belong to this dignified category” (Singh 7).Bayly opines, “Caste as jati--to be seen as a concrete ethnographic fact of Indian life, a source of historic national strengths and organized self-improvement or “uplift” (Bayly 154).

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