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## Dalit Subalternity in Omprakash Valmiki's Autobiography: Joothan

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### ABSTRACT

The present research paper is an attempt to analyze Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan* and explore Dalit subalternity underlying it. During the course of analysis of this autobiography, an attempt is also made to define the key terms like Dalit, subaltern, Dalit consciousness, and Dalit literature. The study of *Joothan* shows that Dalit literature looks at the things from the Dalit's point of view. It aims at creating awareness among Dalits and so-called untouchables to rebel hereto against the oppression and injustice perpetrated on them. These motives of Dalit literature are nicely brought out in *Joothan* by Valmikiji. He is the one who had suffered a lot socially, economically and culturally, and wrestled against all odds in order to cherish the dreams of his life.

**Key Words:** Dalit, subaltern, autobiography, consciousness.

This is an attempt to explore Dalit subalternity in Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan*. Valmiki, who is acknowledged a great Dalit writer in Hindi literature, was born in Chuhda family at Barla, in Mujaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh in 1950. He is a postgraduate in Hindi Literature. He has a number of articles, stories and poems to his credit. His published works include **Sadiyon Ka Santap, Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka** (Poetry collection), **Salaam** (Story Collection) and **Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundarya Shashtra** (Aesthetics of Dalit Literature). *Joothan*, an autobiographical account of his life is much acclaimed literary work in contemporary corpus of literature. He has been the recipient of a number of awards, such as Dr. Ambedkar National Award in 1993,

Parivesh Samman in 1995. Besides, he was privileged to have been the president of the First Dalit Writers' Conference in Nagpur in 1993.

Omprakash Valmiki has creative potential of high order which can be seen in his article entitled *Ek Dalit Ki Atmkatha* published in a book called **Harijan Se Dalit**. It was well received and approved by people from Dalit community, as they found echoes of their own sufferings being reflected in his writing. But he was hesitant in trying his hand on this autobiography which finally came out as *Joothan*. His friends earnestly advised him not to write this literary piece, as it might end his career being revolutionary in nature. His friends thought that it would not be wisely for him to malign his own image by giving his true account of

sufferings and oppression. But Omprakash was not the one who would stop his drive which was initiated with sense of commitment and with specific purpose of creating awareness among people about the on -coming bouts of injustice upon the marginalized ones, with emphasis on Dalits or Untouchables. But with repeated insistence of Rajendra Yadav, the editor of Hindi literary magazine, Hans, he could muster courage to give voice to his experiences and observation of the contemporary society.

The term “Subaltern” is a term that commonly refers to the perspectives of persons from regions and groups outside of the hegemonic power structure. It is used by some thinkers in general sense of the term to refer to the marginalized groups and lower classes-a person rendered without an agency by his or her social status. Gayatri Shivpak says that subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed, for other, for somebody who is not getting a piece of pie. In post colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is a subaltern. A number of thinkers have given their own insight on the term. But, however, all have agreed that subaltern studies or literature focuses on those who are on the periphery of the social construct and need to be addressed. The ‘subaltern Studies’ is global phenomenon in human sciences which needs to be properly attended and substantially addressed to by scholars and thinkers across the world to create space for it in literary discourses.

In the light of the vast spectrum of the subaltern studies, Dalit group or caste can be definitely called a marginalized group which underwent crucial phases of excruciating pangs of oppression and humiliation for centuries by those so-called non-Dalits. It is, therefore, according to reason to dig deep into the origin of this caste system, and the causes account for their utter marginalization. The origin of the term Dalit can be traced back to the Rig Veda where caste system has been referred to in the following sukta:

Brahmanoasya mukhmasit

Bahu Rajnyah kritah

Uru tadasyayad Vaishyah

Padabhyam shudroajayat.1

This sukta means that Brahmins were born from the face or mouth of the Brahma, Kshatriyas from the arms, and Vaishyas from the thighs and Shudras from his feet. This scriptural evidence cannot be treated as an authentic evidence of the origin of these castes or Varnas. This theory was, perhaps, devised to get the functions of society run smoothly. This metaphor ‘Brahma’ has been used to show that harmony among all the main organs is must to maintain sound health. If there strikes a little disharmony and misbalance, the health will show the sign of deterioration. Each of these organs of body is inter-dependent: one cannot function cohesively without the other. Thus these Varnas were generated with intention of creating healthy and sound society. But later on this system was misinterpreted and Shudras were relegated to utter injustice,

humiliation and untold sufferings. This partial system based on hollow assumptions accounts for the outburst of the Shudras to dismantle the entire social norms and structures to keep themselves liberated from the traumatic experiences of further sufferings.

A host of publications dealing with the Dalit sensibility have come up along with a parallel body of literature called Dalit Literature. This Dalit literature which tends to look at the current events from the Dalit points of view has come to occupy a niche in the body of Indian literary expression. Its primary motive is to give voice to the ongoing oppression and unending travails of Dalits in India and to emancipate them to breathe afresh on social, political and cultural fronts. Baburao Bagul, a well-known Dalit short story writer says:

Dalit literature is not a literature of Vengeance. Dalit Sahitya is not a literature which spreads hatred. Dalit Sahitya first promotes man's greatness and man's freedom and for that reason it is an historic necessity.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Arjun Dangle talks about the spirit of Dalit Literature as below:

Dalit Literature is not simply literature; it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people.<sup>3</sup>

Though in Hindi literature, quite a few writers took up some issues and filthy practices perpetuated in society, they did not specifically deal with the oppression and

exploitation faced by Dalits in society. Munshi Premchand, a notable Hindi novelist, has presented the realistic picture of poverty and social evils with which people were struggling hard to be emancipated during pre-independence period. Through his stories and novels, he tried to create general awareness about exploitation and suffering of society, by selecting the characters from different strata of society including Dalits. In Hindi regional novels also social, political and cultural problems faced by the poor including Dalits have been properly rendered. But recent literary voices by Dalit writers have emerged as strong literary force to occupy prestigious place not only in Indian literature but also in literature of the world, as they have concentrated on the oppression and exploitations confronted by Dalits down the ages.

The emergence of B. R. Ambedkar on the Indian socio-political scene as the outstanding leader of schedule castes in the first part the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to a new awakening. Dr D.R. Ambedkar's stand made them realize that they had been deprived of so many of their rights and privileges which they should acquire by their proper actions. This stirred them to action on many fronts. Besides, Gandhi's magnificent efforts promoted their upliftment giving them a fresh name Harijan on a national scale. The new name Dalit further invigorated them, and their spontaneous outcry of assertion against oppression came to be collectively called Dalit literature.

Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography Joothan comprising some 159 odd pages presents an account of his birth and upbringing as an untouchable, marginalized or dalit. It gives an insight into the saga of sufferings and oppression which he has undergone in various phases and places of his life. The word "Joothan" literally means scraps of food left on a plate destined for garbage or for the family pet in a middle class urban home. Indian untouchables have been forced to accept and eat it for their subsistence for centuries. If the meaning of word is taken in this sense, the term Joothan will be then definitely condemnatory. However, the word 'joothan' is also used in the sense of Prasad, and junior members feel honoured if they get a bit from the scraps left on the plates of the respected member or spiritual group of the community. But it is a voluntary option which is gladly accepted. The members availing this opportunity feel pleased and privileged. But in the present context, former meaning of the term joothan finds full expression. Valmikiji gives a thumb nail description of his experiences of life--from childhood, school and college life and different places of work, whether it be Barla, Dehradun, Ambernath, or Chandrapur in Maharashtra.

Valmikiji opens his autobiography with a graphic presentation of the residence of Chuhda community which is located a little away from the locality of Taga, also called Tyagis, hegemonic group-privileged and dominating one. His caste is Dalit community, the oppressed group, and the banded laborers. It is better to quote the

general observation of Sharankumar Limbale about the habitats of untouchables:

Here, the village becomes the metropolis, and Dalit exists on the periphery. Dalit settlements are not only apart from the upper caste Hindu settlements; they are actually outside the boundary of the village.<sup>4</sup>

As far as education was concerned hardly children from the Chuhda community would go to primary school. His father Chhotan, though an illiterate, wished his son, Omprakash to be properly educated as he firmly believed that his caste could be redeemed and rehabilitated only through proper education. With the repeated visits and requests, however, he got his son admitted in the school with the help of Master Harphool Singh. But it was no less than an ordeal for Omprakash as he would be always addressed with a humiliating term "Abey Chuhade Ke" by the rest of the students who belonged to Tyagi families of hegemonic community. Valmiki gives further account of his travail when he was asked by his teacher to sweep the huge ground and which he carried on for three days until he was finally seen by his father. His father could not bear the brunt of this humiliation and asserted before the teacher:

**Hindi:** "Kaud-sa master hai vo Dronacharya ki aulad, jo mere ladake se jhadu lagvavai hai....."<sup>5</sup>

**English:** Who is the progeny of Dronacharya who has forced my son to sweep the huge ground.....

The teacher also reacted in his own way and asked him to remove his son from the

school, which his father immediately did. The writer says that this bold stand of his father against injustice continues to echo in his memory and encourages him to voice his angst and suffering fearlessly throughout. It was very difficult for his father to face this unfortunate moment and get his son back in the same school. But, however, the Pradhan of Barla ensured him that his son would be taken back in the school. This incident makes it very clear that whereas there were people like the teacher against the education of Chuhda community, there were also people like Pradhan who assisted them in achieving their goals.

Valmikiji further presents an account of his life which is directly related to the title of his autobiography, Joothan. In any big functions or rituals such as marriage, people of the Chuhda community were supposed to share the responsibility of manual labours, and in turn they used to get the food left on the plates of the guests and not the fresh food from the kitchen. Once when his mother at the end of the function requested the head of the family to give food to her children, Omprakash, of course being one of them, Mr. Sukhdev Tyagi abused her badly, saying:

**Hindi:** “Tokra bhar to joothan le ja rahi hai.....Ooper se jatakon ke liye khana maang rahi hai? Apani aukat maen rah Chuhai! Utha tokra darwaje se chalti ban”.<sup>6</sup>

**English:** You have already taken basketful of scraps and still demanding food for your children? You know your limit chuhdi! Take your basket and get lost.

These words were as sharp as javelin to the writer and still pinch him badly. His mother like lioness roared and upturned the basket full of joothan before Sukhdev Tyagi and suggested that let this joothan be collected and served to his guest as morning snacks:

**Hindi:** “Ise uthake apne ghar maen dhar le. Kal tadke baratiyon ko nashte me khila dena.”<sup>7</sup>

**English:** Collect the joothan from the ground and preserve it. You feed your baratis in the morning as breakfast.

She left the door of Sukhdev Tyagi and never visited it again in her life. This sudden outburst of his mother brings out the fact that the voices which had been suppressed for a long have come out with force and assertion to show their protest against on-going atrocities and exploitation of hegemonic groups. Though the Chuhda community never liked the subjugation and surveillance of Tyagis, they could not afford to rebel against them owing to utter poverty and lack of awareness, despite attainment of independence in 1947.

This account of Valmiki seems to be not so honest, as situations in late fifties were not so bad. At a function, everybody was given nice food at the end of the function, despite the fact whether he or she had contributed to function or not. However, there is a community in Eastern U.P. called Mushar which used to collect remnants from the leaves plates, but they were never or are forced to do so. Earlier and even now they are in the profession of making leaves plates

and cups which they supply to people having some functions or festivals at home. If Mushars are forbidden to collect the scrapes, they feel insulted as if their right to collect the remnant food is being questioned, and then they would threaten to stop the supply of plates and cups to needy persons.

Valmikiji recalls how his classmates, though belonged to so-called hegemonic group, had close bond of friendship with him. He still appreciates the friendly ties with Sukhram Singh, Shrawan Kumar and Chandrapal Verma as classmates who really never made him feel that he was from an untouchable community. When the author stood first in the class in the half yearly examination, he was made class monitor and was asked to occupy front row. This further generated a sense of confidence and assertion. Still some of the teachers treated him badly and underestimated his excellent performance. He recalls some of the teachers such as Omdutta Tyagi, Narendra Kumar Tyagi, Brijpal Singh and a few others who did not qualify to be teachers despite their formal degrees and qualifications. He also recalls how he failed the XII the standard practical examination due to dirty game played by his own teacher.

Valmikiji gives further accounts which neutralize his bitterness experienced earlier by him. First, he has all the praises for Baburam Tyagi who happened to be an excellent teacher and who used to correct his Hindi. He further acknowledges that his passion for language and literature was sharpened only by his teacher's

encouragement. Second, when he stood first class in tenth standard, Chamanlal Tyagi came to congratulate him to his door. It was for the first time that a Tyagi came to appreciate the performance of a Chuhada to his door. In addition, Chamanlal invited him to his place for lunch which he enjoyed beside him (Chamanlal Tyagi). Even Chamanlal asked his daughter to remove the plate used by him, saying":

**Hindi:** "Bhaiya ke bartan utha ke le ja."<sup>8</sup>

**English:** Remove the vessels of your brother (Omprakash).

Chamanlal's son was also his classmate who had always been good to him. This positive attitude of Tyagis towards Chuhda community shows the beginning of a change in society which was a predominated by the stigma of untouchability for ages.

Valmikiji is diametrically opposed to the post-marriage social tradition euphemistically known as Salam. Salam is an Urdu word which literally means to salute. It word Salam sounds very pleasing and is, of course, very pleasing, as it is directed to show one's respect towards the concerned person. But ironically it has bad implication when it is used in the context of Dalit Post marriage practice. In Salam, the bride after marriage was supposed to move around from door to door saluting the dominant group for memento given in form of old clothes, vessels, grain and sometimes cash. But in turn quite often than not the bride would get abuses and come back. It implies that bride was made tolerant by the non-Dalit groups immediately after tying



the knot of marriage. But perpetual practice of Salaam was broken by the writer from his own brother Janesar's marriage, and he also desisted his brother –in-law from following this ignominious practice. His proposition to his father was:

**Hindi:** “apnee hi shadi me dulha ghar ghar ghume...buri bat hai. Badi jat walon ke dulhe to aise kahin nahin jate. Ye dulhan Barla jakar aise hi ghar ghar jayegi salaam karane”.<sup>9</sup>

**English:** It is very bad that a bride in his own marriage should move around from door to door. The brides of the non-Dalit do not go anywhere like this. This bridegroom will too move from door to door to do salaam at Barla.

Valmikiji's collection of stories entitled “Salaam”, registers strong protest against Salaam. In one of the stories called Salaam, the major character Harish questions strongly about the justification of this practice and determines to deviate from this practice from his own marriage. He bitterly answers his father-in-law who is insisting to follow the tradition of Saalam:

**Hindi:** “Aap chahe jo samajhen... maen is riwas ko atm Vishwas todane ki sajish manta hun. Yah Salam ki rasma band honi chahiye.”<sup>10</sup>

**English:** Whatever may you take it for...I consider it as a conspiracy to hammer (our) self-confidence. The celebration of this Salaam should be stopped.

The writer now shifts his locale from his own village to Dehradun where he was

forced to migrate after failing the XII standard examination in Tyagi Inter College Barla. Since his maternal uncle was staying in Indresh Nagar in Dehradun, he preferred to take admission in D.A.V. Inter College, though here also his caste was coming in the way of his admission. In this college a group of students quite often commented on his dress as it was not properly tailored and did not suit to the fancy of a city college. He remembers that how he was supported by one called Thapa who penalized those students who initially teased and harassed him in the college. Valmiki also recounts that in Indresh Nagar, there was a beautiful library with huge collection of literature based on Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It was here only that he was privileged to read a book called Dr Ambedkar: Jeewan Aur Parichaya by Chandrika Prasad Jigyashu.

The financial obligations forced him to earn his bread and he thus joined the Ordinance Factory Dehradun as an apprentice after qualifying the written examination followed by personal interview. After a training of one year at the Ordinance Factory, he was further selected in Ordinance Factory Training Institute, Khamaria in Jabalpur where he stayed for a span of two years. Meanwhile applications were invited in Ordinance factory Training Institute Ambarnath and he was selected there also. He was pleased to see the beautiful hostel located the fascinating foot of the mountain. The Institute had very rich library having huge collection of all the classics by Victor Hugo, Tolstoy, Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, Emile Zola etc. Each room of

the hostel had the capacity to accommodate ten persons. The writer shared a room with persons hailing from different places of India and his caste never came as barrier at any level. Among all roommates, Sudama Patil from Bhusawal was his closest companion.

It was in Ambernath only that his literary sensibility started blooming and blossoming as he was fully exposed to literary activities in Maharashtra. He witnessed a series of plays such as, Sakharam Binder, Gidhade, Khamosh Adalat Jari hai, Ashad Ka Ek Din, Hayvadan etc. It was here only that he got acquainted with the prominent Dalit writers, Daya Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, Baburam Bagul, Keshav Meshram, Narayan Surve, Yashvant Manohar etc. Looking to his fascination towards the literary activities, Sudama Patil introduced him to Mr. Kulkarni, a key person who would keep updated account of the literary programmes to be conducted in close vicinity of the hostel. He was a Brahmin and had strong liking for non-vegetarian food available in the hostel mess. He would quite often visit to mess to have the meat to his fill. Despite the food being expensive, the writer could not afford to discourage him to visit the mess. The relation between Kulkarni and the writer developed to such an extent that he used to visit his house quite frequently like family members and Mrs. Kulkarni treated him like her own son. They also had their daughter, Savita, of Valmiki's age, was very close to him. Since Mr. Kulkarni was associated with theatre activities he was frequented by Prof.

Kamble to discuss seriously about the modality of Marathi drama. Once Mrs. Kulkarni offered tea to Prof. Kamble in a cup, which was different from other cups. When the writer wanted to know the reason as to why Prof. Kamble was served in a different kind of cup, he was told that Mr. Kamble was an untouchable and thus a separate cup was offered to him. Sudama Patil told him that the Brahmins of Pune do not allow the untouchables to even touch their vessels.

**Hindi:** "Marathi Brahman wah bhi Poona ke Brahman maharon ko apne bartan chhoone nahin dete isliye unke alag bartan rakkhe jate hain."<sup>11</sup>

**English:** "Marathi Brahmins, that too from Pune, do not allow the Mahars to touch even their vessels. Therefore they keep separate sets of vessels for them."

The Kulkarnis always treated him as Brahmin due to his sir name, Valmiki. When the author knew the reality he wanted to tell Savita finally that he was not a Brahmin but an untouchable. He was not starving for false respect in the name of caste. She felt very bad and requested him not to tell the parents that he was an outcaste. Savita had no problem but she apprehended that her parents might not approve his further visit to their house. This throws light that the people of earlier generation were more concerned with caste system and untouchability but new generation does not bother much and realizes the futility of caste system.

Afterwards Valmiki was further transferred to Chandrapur which offered him

altogether a more fertile soil to grow his literary sensibility to a greater extent. It was in Chandrapur that he fully stepped into the Dalit movement. There he realized that Nagpur is a Dikshabhumi for Dalits. He started a literary magazine called Him Jharana in Chandrapur. He was fully involved in Dalit Panther Movement. He cites one incident which took place in 1984 in Malkapur of Amarawati district, which shows the myopic vision of non-Dalit teachers who asked the students to remove the pages from the school text books containing a chapter on Dr. Ambedkar. In order to register his protest against this act, the author wrote a poem entitled Vidrup Chehra. Finally he gives one more illustration based on the nuisance generated by the caste system. In Chandrapur, Mr. Qureshi was working as sub-inspector of police in the Ordinance Factory Estate and in due course of time he became very close of Valmikiji. Mr. Qureshi informed Valmikiji that a new commandant of D.A.C. had been recently appointed who belonged to his district and decided to introduce Valmiki to the commandant. The commandant was also pleased to meet a person from his own village Barla and asked him that Barla was a village of Tyagis and which caste he belonged to. When the writer told that he belonged to Chuhda community, the commandant froze as if there was nothing to be talked about. Valmiki after visiting a number of places gives his observation that Untouchables whether they are in Maharashtra or Utter Pradesh are facing the same fate.

**Hindi:** “Maharashtra maen mehtar aur Utter Pradesh ke Chuhda Valmiki maen koi antar nahin tha. Bas, bhasha ko chhodkar, shesh tamam cheejen eksi haen.”<sup>12</sup>

**English:** There is basically no difference between Chuhada Valmiki of Utter Pradesh and Mehtar of Maharashtra, excepting their language.

Valmiki has presented his autobiography as literary piece which needs to be objectively evaluated and dispassionately judged. The locale of his novel is Mujaffarpur district of Utter Pradesh and span of time late fifties and early sixties. One who is familiar with the real situation, he/she will find that the few incidents referred to are to some extent exaggerated. During those days there was no much discrimination between Dalit and non-Dalit students barring few exceptions. Even a number of teachers were appointed from the Dalit Community and students called them Munshiji and touched their feet as guru. Despite fine rendering of rural theme, few events have been imaginatively interwoven. However, the descriptions tendered in the work shows that people from old generation were stubborn and caste conscious and disliked the untouchables, but their children did not have the same attitude towards students coming from Dalit family. This change came only because of the spread of education. I feel sometimes disagreeable with the kind of language sometimes used by Valmikiji in Joothan. Though an author may have strong reasons to protest against existing systems, he can do

so more convincingly in better tongue than in abusive one. In our life too, we cannot express ourselves better; we cannot frame proper sentences and fail badly in effective communication when we are emotionally charged. The same is true with a literary artist who needs to follow the frame work of some critical theories. Experiments in literature are the most welcome steps provided they have proper grounds for justification.

To conclude, Dalit literature looks at the things from the Dalit's point of view. It aims at creating awareness among Dalits and so-called untouchables to rebel hereto against the oppression and injustice perpetrated on them. These motives of Dalit literature are nicely brought out in Joothan by Valmikiji. He is the one who had suffered a lot socially, economically and

culturally, and wrestled against all odds in order to cherish the dreams of his life. I want to conclude my paper with questions such as -can Dalit literature be written only by Dalit writers? Why can't non-Dalit write Dalit literature? If a Dalit living in ivory tower can write Dalit literature without having the experience of Dalit life, then why can't a non-Dalit, who has seen the suffering of Dalit life from a very close quarter, write Dalit Literature? Why can't a Dalit write other than Dalit literature? Why does a Dalit writer need to have a separate aesthetics rejecting the canonical literature? These and few more questions need to be answered in the intellectual seminars of this kind through interaction, discussion and deliberations. These queries can be settled if writers start writing literature which addresses the problems and issues of society in an umbrella term.

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