



DALITNESS IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S JOOOTHAN

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ABSTRACT

The Social Structure of India is stratified with inbuilt inequalities and injustices, based on the caste- system. Sanctified by Brahminic- Hinduism. However, the Dalit in India the term Dalit forcefully expresses the oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal' which means to crack open, split, crush, grind and so forth. By identified themselves as Dalit writers like Valmiki are embracing an identity that is born in a historic struggle to dismantle the caste system. Valmiki's subject matter is from the day-to-day experience of an urban middle class reader is evident from the very Joothan. The Hindi word 'Joothan' literary means food left on an eater's plate usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle class. The word carries the connotation of ritual purity and pollution as 'Joothan' means polluted. 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 Jhoothan.

Keywords *Inequalities, Brahminic, Hinduism, Dravidian.*

INTRODUCTION

Omprakash Valmiki's "Joothan" "an autobiographical account of his birth and upbringing as an untouchable, or Dalit, in the newly independent India of the 1950s, is one of the first portrayals of Dalit life in north India from an insider's perspective. "Joothan" literary means scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or for the family pet in a middle-class urban home. It is related to the word "Jootha," which means polluted, and such

DR. NIRLAY R. PETKAR

1P a g e



scraps are characterized as “Joothan” only if someone else eats them. India’s untouchables have been forced to accept and eat “Joothan” for their subsistence for centuries. The word encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of this community, which has lived at the bottom of India’s social pyramid for Millenia. Although untouchability was legally abolished in the constitution of the newly independent India in 1949, Dalits continue to face discrimination, economic deprivation, violence and ridicule. Traditionally, Indian literatures have either ignored untouchables or portrayed them as victims in need of saviors, as objects without voice or agency. Valmiki has broken new ground with an authentic recording of these unrepresented experiences. He tells the stories of life in the untouchable caste of Chuhra, at the bottom rung of society; his heroic struggle to survive this preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution; the cruel obstacle she overcame to become the first high school graduate and his neighborhood; his coming to consciousness under the influence of the great political leader Dr. Ambedkar, and his transformation into a speaking subject bearing witness to the oppression and exploitation that he endured as an individual and as a member of a stigmatized and oppressed community.

The social structure of India is stratified, with inequalities and injustices, based on the caste system sanctified by Brahminic- Hinduism. Although social stratification exists in almost all societies, the caste system is quite unique to the Indian society. Sanctioned by the religious- philosophical system, the Dalits are socially placed outside the fourfold caste-system and they are referred to as the fifth caste (Panchamas) even they live as outcastes. Dalits are differing entailed from the lowest strata of other societies with regard to their stigma of untouchability. In fact, Dalits have been the most degraded downtrodden, exploited and the least educated in our society. They have been socially and culturally economically and politically subjected and marginalized through three thousand years of our history.

The birth of Dalit literature is located in different historical/ literary personalities like Gautama Buddha, Chokhamela, Mahatma Phule, S.M. Mate, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar etc. by Dalit and non-Dalit critics. Though there is no unanimity about and although Dalit literature as a distinct

However, the Dalit in India are believed to be the ancient Dravidian race, the original people of India. We can say that they only introduce culture in India. They were the owner of all property. The Aryans, a series of related and highly self-conscious tribes sharing a common language and religion, begin their invasions of India from the North-West around 1500 Bc. If a king wins a battle in the neighboring country, he makes the loser king and his people as slaves and snatches all their properties. Here also the Aryans snatched away all their properties and kept them away a side branding them as outcaste. So, the dominant view traces the origins of both caste and untouchability to the Aryans themselves and to their way of relating to the original peoples of India with whom they come into contact with.

DR. NIRLAY R. PETKAR

2P a g e



Untouchability and segregation are result due to the Brahman supremacy among the Dravidian races. The Dravidian race was initially casteless and has horizontal ethnic deviations and clean groups under which Brahmanization become vertically graded and ritually by the principle of purity- pollution.

The terms 'Dalit' forcefully expresses the oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal' which means to crack open, split, crush, grind and so forth, and it has generally been used as a verb to describe the process of processing food grains and textile. Its metamorphic usage, still as a verb, can be seen in descriptions of warfare and vanquishing of enemies. Jyoti Rao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, two towering figures in the pantheon of Dalit history were the first to appropriate the word as a noun and an adjective the early decades of the 20th century to described the extreme oppression of untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar revered leader of the Dalits, declared that 'the main cause which is responsible for the fate of the untouchables is the Hindu religion and its teaching.' Dr, Ambedkar thinks that untouchability was born around 400 years ago. One may agree or disagree with Dr, Ambedkar's hypothesis regarding the origins of caste and untouchability, however the fact is that untouchables have long live outside the village boundaries, subsisting on the flesh of dead draught animals that it was their bounden duty to dispose of. During the Independence movement many a congress leader gave the consumption of carrion by untouchables as the reason why caste Hindus practiced untouchability against them. Why Dr. Ambedkar also advised his followers to give up eating carrion, he replied to the caste Hindus that untouchable had restored to eating it only because they were too poor to get anything else and not because they loved it.

By identified themselves as Dalits, writers like Valmiki 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. As Dalit waged battles for equality and dignity, the names they had been given by their oppressor become an issue. So stigmatized were untouchable caste names like Chuhra and their claims that they were indeed the aboriginal people of India.

Valmiki or Balmiki was widely adopted as a caste names by the Chuhras of Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh under the influence of the Arya Samaj a Hindu reform movement in Northern India. Arya Samajists were alarmed by the conversion of large members of Churas to Christianity and Sikhism in the 1920's and the 1930's, they started emulating the Christian the Christian missionaries by school and hospitals for the untouchables and performing shuddhi, a ceremony to reconvert the Christian converts. Arya Samajist told churas that they were the descendants of Valmiki the creator of the Sanskrit Ramayana. Bhagwan Das suggests that caste Hindus appropriate the churas saint Lal Beg or Bala Shah and renamed him Valmiki in order to 'Hinduize' them. In Joothan, Omprakash

DR. NIRLAY R. PETKAR

3P a g e



Valmiki narrates how a Christian convert Sewak Ram Maishi, come to his neighborhood to teach the chura children the alphabet. Valmiki's growing estrangement from chuhra rituals makes his father worry that he may have converted to Christianity. When Valmiki's father finds out that his son had begun to use Valmiki as his surname a sign of his self-pride, he is ecstatic.

Valmiki devotes several pages to the ironies that his new identity entails. While in Bombay he is taken to be a Brahmin by a Maharashtrian Brahmin family, indicating the possibility of 'passing' if one travels far enough from the place of one's birth. In Western Uttar Pradesh, however, this surname does not lift him up from his chuhrahood and the attendant untouchability. Among the Buddhists he is seen as a casteist because he refuses to shed this identity marker as a badge of self-assertion. A declaration that he does not want to hide his Dalit identity. Valmiki points out the daily dilemmas Dalits face in a caste-based society that makes it almost impossible to shed Me's caste marker and leave behind the stigmas attached to it. Autobiography has been a favorite genre of Dalit writers. This is not surprising, in light of the emphasis placed by them on authenticity of experience. Dalit writers like Valmiki are thus producing literary analysis and literary theory simultaneously with their literary creations. On the one hand, their work has broken the hegemony of high caste literary establishment which can no longer continue to present its choices as universal and timeless, and on the other, by producing their own discourses and publishing it in Dalit run title magazines, they have created a space for Dalit writing and Dalit readership.

In this preface Valmiki writes that Joothan present these experiences that did not find a place in literary representations, experience like Valmiki's birth and growing up in the untouchable's caste of churas. The heroic struggle that he waged to survive this preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution, and his transformation into a speaking subject and recorder of the oppression and exploitation he endured, not only as an individual but also as a member of a stigmatized and oppressed community, had never been represent in the annals of 'Hindi Literature.' He, therefore, has broken a new ground mapped a new territory.

How far-removed Valmiki's subject matter is from the day-to-day experience of an urban middle-class reader is evident from the very title Joothan, The Hindu word 'Joothan' literary 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 water were to eat it. The word carries the connotations of ritual purity and pollution as 'Joothan' means polluted. The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community which not only had to rely on Joothan but also realized it. Valmiki gives a details description of collecting, preserving and eating Joothan. His memories of being assigned to guard the drying joothan from cows and chickens, and of this

DR. NIRLAY R. PETKAR

4P a g e



relishing the dried and reprocessed joothan burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present.

It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the most powerful movements of the text is Valmiki's mother's overturning of the basketful of Joothan after she is humiliated by Sukhdev Singh Tyagi. Her act of defiance sows the seeds of rebellion in the child Valmiki. The text is dedicated to her and Valmiki's father both portrayed as heroic figures, who desires something better for their child and fought for his safety and growth with tremendous courage. Valmiki's father ambitions for his son are evident in the nickname Munshi, that he gives Valmiki. The child Valmiki rises on their shoulders to become the first high school graduate from his basti. He pays his debt by giving voice to the indignities suffered by them and other Dalits. The autobiography is a moving narrative that creates renewed interest in Dalit movements by discomposing complacency and demanding introspection, as the emotive description of the life in an Uttarakhand village registers the memories of lived experience of caste and discrimination, submission rage and resistance. The book turns out to be a culture construct that gives insight into the modus operandi of oppression and the process of resistance and also that is directed toward the constant strive for social amelioration and individual excellence.

In the space for first four passages of the book, Valmiki describes the social structure and rural setting wherein his childhood experience was shaped. The moralistic tone of the narrational voice is at play when he scorns and criticizes, opines and passes judgement on the social surrounding. The very first sentence of the text talks about the space- a home in the housing landscape of the village community. The author's Dalit family lives in a house adjacent to Chanderbhan Taga's gher (i.e., a house for male members) and despite being good neighbors and having a common wall to separate their houses, it is cruelly ironical that they live miles apart because of the centuries old practice of untouchability. Further the writer's conscious selection of writing about space metaphorically hints towards his unending search for a distant space, quite apart and secure be it literary success or social recognition and acceptance or political and economic rights equivalent to those of privileged caste and classes. The second passage presents stark realism in its choice of ugliness at the cost of aesthetic sensibility.

Writing with Dalit consciousness Valmiki delineate / portrays the untellable and unfold miseries of his life ensuing from caste discrimination, perpetrated poverty, hunger, widened material inequalities, unemployment, humiliation and human atrocities, His life story foregrounds his genuine concerns for the eradication of traditional culture practices prevalent in his native place, He expose the castesist hegemony by undermining the social customs such as 'Slam' unpaid labor, and religious ceremony of sacrificing / slaughtering animals, The oppression and exploitation of Dalit are rooted in local traditions, culture and

DR. NIRLAY R. PETKAR

5P a g e



language. Joothan is constructed in the form of memories that erupt in Valmiki's mind when triggered through a stimulus in the present. These are memories of trauma that Valmiki had kept suppressed. He uses the metaphors of erupting lava explosion conflagrations and flooding to denote their uncontrollable character. Valmiki present the traumatic encounter with his persecutors as dramatized scenes, as cinematic moments. He relives this traumatic experience again, but this time to go past them in an ethical framework and passing judgement on them something that the child could not do.

Valmiki places his and his Dalit friends encounters with upper caste teachers in the context of the Brahmins teacher Dronacharya tricking his low caste disciple Eklavya into cutting his thumb and presenting it to him as part of his 'gurudakshina' or teacher's tribute. This is a famous incident in the Mahabharata. By doing this Dronacharya ensured that Eklavya, the better student of archery, could never compete against Arjun, the Kshatriya disciple. Indeed, having lost his thumb, Eklavya could no longer perform archery. In high caste telling, the popular story presents a biased teacher. When Valmiki's father goes to the school and calls the headmaster a Dronacharya, he links the 20th century caste relations to those that prevailed two thousand years ago. By showing his father's ability to deconstruct the story, Valmiki portrays Dalits as articulate subjects who have seen through the cherished myths of their oppressors.

In the space of first four passages of the book, the writer, Omprakash Valmiki describes the social structure and rural setting wherein his childhood experiences were shaped. The moralistic tone of the narrational voice is at play when he scorns and criticizes opines and passes judgement on the social surrounding. The very first sentence of the text talks about the space – a home in the housing landscape of the village community. The author's Dalit family lives in a house adjacent to Chanderbhan Taga's Gher (i.e., a house for male members), and despite being good neighbors and having a common wall to separate their houses, it is cruelly ironical that they live miles apart because of the centuries old practice of untouchability. Further, the writer's conscious selection of writing about space metaphorically hints toward his unending search for a distinct space, quite apart and secure, be it literary success, or social recognition and acceptance or political and economic rights equallent to those of privileged castes and classes. The second passage presents stark realism in its choice of ugliness at the cost of aesthetic sensibility. The most easily discernible fact is that there are hardly few sentences which emanates humor in the text and out of those, this paragraph has three. The village women, especially Brahman women from the Hindu upper caste, whose faces have always been properly called so as not to be seen in public, are shown squatting for going to toilet in the open exposing their more private parts in broad daylight, and simultaneously busy in discussing the petty quarrels of the villagers in the fashion of a 'Round Table Conference' (2). In a humorous spark, the author ideological differences and

DR. NIRLAY R. PETKAR

6P a g e



predilection flash in the subtext. First, the primordial natural urge for evacuation puts all the cultural constructs and social obligations at secondary position. It can be suggestive of another tangential implication that if human beings, the writer's selection is the beautiful other half of humanity, require to clean themselves on daily basis, on what premise the savarnas direct their profound repulsion toward the outcastes. Second, the mock-heroic displacement of the phrase "Round Table Conference" needs exploitation, as it is sarcastically dragged down the level of impotence and finally to excreta. The uninteresting description can be explained via the author's intent. The ever-increasing middle class seems to put an end to the vertically hierarchal oppression and challenges the practice of untouchability on the basis of pollution and uncleanness; nevertheless, Valmiki encounters social exclusion at that very moment when he discloses his caste-based social identity. The narratorial voice in exploring the content life had in store for the author locates itself in socio historical phenomena. Dr. Ambedkar and Gandhiji disagreed on the issue of special representation for untouchables there confirmation made negotiations during the second Round Table Conference session difficult. The situation worsened when Gandhi question Ambedkar's bona fides and claimed to be the vast mass of untouchables Writing with Dalit consciousness, Valmiki delineates / portrays the untellable and untold miseries of his life ensuing from caste discrimination, perpetrated poverty, hunger, widened material inequalities, unemployment, humiliation and human atrocities. His life story foregrounds his genuine concern for the eradication of traditional cultural practices prevalent in his native place. He exposes the casteist hegemony by undermining the social customs such as "slam" unpaid labor, and religious ceremony of sacrificing with the Dalit movement since his school days, the accomplishment of rational education, the feeding on Gorky and the philosophy of Materialism, and the slant for Buddhism initiated by Dr. Ambedkar, Bhadant Anand Kauslyayan and Rahul Sanskrityatyan shaped the new Dalit sensibility in him. However, the writer's message must be rationally accepted.

CONCLUSION

While the education system is indicated as death dealing for Dalits, Valmiki pays tributes to the Dalits organic intellectuals who help nurture the growth of Dalit consciousness in him. Valmiki portrays a village life where the members of his caste, chuhras, lived outside the village were forced to perform unpaid labor and denied basic requirements like access to public land and water let alone education or fellow feeling. He also describes the cleaning of stinking straw beds in the cattle sheds of higher caste villagers of the disposal of dead animals and their hides. Valmiki performed most of the tasks of intense physical labor under a scorching sun and was often paid nothing. One of the distinctive aspects of Joothan which marks it as a Dalit text is its interrogative discourse. The text is full of questions that demand

DR. NIRLAY R. PETKAR

7 Page



an answer; ‘Why didn’t an epic poet enter write a word on our lives?’ ‘Why is it a crime to ask for the price of one’s labor?’ ‘Why are the Hindus so cruel so hear less against Dalits?’

While the indictment of an unjust social system and its benefactors is one trust of the text, its other important preoccupation is so examining Dalit lives substantively. Joothan combines representation of struggles with the external enemy within the internalization by Dalit people of upper caste Brahminic values, the superstitions of Dalit villagers the patriarchal oppression of Dalit women by their men the attempts by Dalits who have attained a middle class economic status to ‘pass’ as high castes and the attendant denial of their root, their inferiority complex which makes them criticize the practice of rearing pigs by rural Dalits, all this aspects of Dalits struggle ate an equally important aspect of Joothan. The oppression and exploitation of Dalit ate rooted in local traditions culture and language. The system is coercive, despite the educational and economic ample opportunities availed the social inequality by and large prevails. Valmiki presents a social critique with a view to impressing the required transformation in the contemporary mindset.

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