



OPPRESSION TO ASSERTION: DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS IN OM PRAKASH VALMIKI'S *JOOZHAN*

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The word 'Dalit' gained currency in the second half of the twentieth century in India, when a group of young Marathi writer-activists founded an organization called Dalit Panthers. The word Dalit is a common usage in Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati and many other Indian languages, meaning the poor and oppressed persons. It is derived from the Sanskrit root 'dal' which means to crack open, split, crush, grind and it forcefully expresses the oppressed status of the erstwhile untouchables in the Indian society. Dalit literature has come to occupy a unique status in the domain of Indian literature despite the charge of being propagandistic and negative in its approach, levied against it. Repudiating the remarks, noted Hindi Dalit writer, Om Prakash Valmiki says, "Dalit literature is the portrayal of the wishes and aspirations of the oppressed Dalits". Non-Dalit writers belonging to high caste have, no doubt, portrayed the sufferings of the dalits, however, Dalit writers feel that only Dalits can represent Dalits in an authentic manner. This claim of Dalit writers finds a parallel in the aboriginal writers in the USA and Canada. Valmiki's autobiography *Joozhan* (the word literally means food left on an eater's plate, usually meant to be thrown in a garbage pail) captures the misery and poverty of Valmiki's community. Valmiki relives the traumatic experiences of his past and present in the pages of his autobiography, bringing to the fore the exploitation suffered by the Dalit at the hands of upper caste people. Thrust of the paper lies in making a critical assessment of *Joozhan* as a text celebrating Dalit assertion and dismantling anti-Dalit hegemonic discourses.

Key Words: Dalit, Joozhan, Oppression, Hegemony.

Why is my caste my only identity?

Joozhan

The line reflects vividly the angst, anguish and the iniquitous relation between caste and one's identity, forming the focal point of Dalit literature. There is a vehement urge embedded in Dalit works to overcome the obstacles of caste through mass awakening and consciousness raising. Om Prakash Valmiki, a noted Hindi Dalit writer, raises several such questions related to his caste in his award winning autobiography *Joozhan*. Before venturing to make an in-depth study of Valmiki's *Joozhan* as a Dalit text, it is apt to understand the implication of the term 'Dalit'.

The term 'Dalit' a derivative of Sanskrit word 'Dal' which means to be crushed and destroyed, refers to the poor and downtrodden. According to Ghan Shyam Shah, "Dalit includes those termed in administrative parlance as Schedule Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward classes" (Shah, 8). Traditionally, in the Hindu social order, they are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, considered Ati-Shudras or Avarna and are treated as untouchables. Dalits are a mixed population of numerous castes and

in Hindu society, Dalit state has been historically associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure such as leather work, butchering or removal of rubbish, animal carcasses and human waste. In pre-independence India Dalits stayed outside the village and worked as manual labourers and sweepers. They were segregated and banned from full participation in Hindu social life. Unfortunately, even after independence, discrimination against Dalits still exists in rural areas in routine matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and water sources, though it has largely disappeared in urban areas and public spheres. Basically, “caste is a lived social experience in India more than a prescribed mode of social stratification” (Davy XV). Despite the massive changes brought about urbanization, industrialization and globalization, the grim reality of caste convention still looms large over the Indian social order and has not shown any substantial signs of reduction.

As compared to the term ‘Harijan’ given to the untouchables by Mahatma Gandhi, the term ‘Dalit’ found a ready acceptance among the untouchable communities all over India. It expresses Dalits’ awareness about themselves as oppressed people and signifies their resolve to demand liberation through a revolutionary transformation of the system that denies them the opportunities to ameliorate their lot. Bishop A.C.Lal considers “the word ‘Dalit’ as a beautiful word because it transcends narrow national and sectarian frontiers”(Lal,xiii). Arjun Dangle, a Dalit writer does not consider Dalit as a caste but rather ‘ a realization’ which “is related to the experiences, joys, sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society”(Dangle,264).

It was Dr Ambedkar in the twentieth century, who took up cudgels against the injustice and exploitation meted out to Dalits due to caste discrimination. Dr Ambedkar held Hindu religion and its teachings responsible for the fate of the untouchables. He had declared “you have got to apply the dynamite to the Vedas and the Shastras, which deny any part to reason” (quoted in Valmiki, XIX). On 25 December 1927, Ambedkar had burnt a copy of *Manusmriti* (an ancient Hindu text) in a bonfire as Manu, the ancient sage, is believed to have formulated the laws of pollution and untouchability. Moreover, as opposed to Gandhi’s efforts to remove untouchability through penance and acts of social service by caste Hindus, Ambedkar used the language of rights and legal provisions. He stressed upon a positive correlation between untouchability and economic deprivation and disparity, constantly emphasizing the exploitation of Dalits as to how they were denied the right to education, ownership of land and jobs above the level of scavenging or any other menial occupation and they were also forced to do the labour without any wages. Valmiki refers to a situation when his village men were beaten up for refusing to work without wages. He poses a question, “why it is a crime to ask for the price of one’s labour?” (Valmiki, 39) Ambedkar endeavoured to inculcate awareness about such acts of injustice and exploitation and make the Dalits conscious that they have their own identity as human beings, equally equipped with physical and mental capacity as other human beings and equally entitled to enjoy all the human rights without any abridgement or limitation.

According to Valmiki, Dalit consciousness is elemental in opposing the cultural inheritance of the upper castes, the notion that culture is a hereditary right for them and one that is denied to Dalits. Defining Dalit consciousness further, Valmiki says “Dalit consciousness is deeply concerned with the question, “Who am I? What is my identity?” (Valmiki, 28). It is this consciousness that gives Dalit literature its unique power and separates it from traditional Hindi literature describing Dalit characters. According to Valmiki, “Dalit consciousness does not just make an account of or give a report on the anguish, misery, pain and exploitation of Dalits., or draw a tear-streaked and sensitive portrait of Dalit agony; rather it is that which is absent from “original” consciousness, the simple and straight forward perspective that breaks the spell of the shadow of the cultural, historical and social roles for Dalits. That is Dalit consciousness. “Dalit” means deprived of human rights, those who have been denied them on a social level. Their consciousness is Dalit consciousness”. (Valmiki, 29). It is a staunch feeling of protest against the imposed lower caste status and evil of untouchability and a sense of self-respect and pride for a new social order based on the values of liberty, equality, justice and fraternity.

It is this protest that lies embedded in Dalit literature as is evident in *Joothan*, where Valmiki poses a string of questions wondering “why does one have to be a Hindu in order to be a good human being----.

I have seen and suffered the cruelty of Hindus since childhood. Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak? Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?" (Valmiki, 41)

Dalits struggle against the injustice through political as well as cultural means. Dalit literature is one of the means of expressing their resistance and creativity. Though in the beginning, the upper caste publishers did not publish the writings of the Dalit writers, they continued to write making every possible effort to voice their sentiments and feelings. One of the first conferences of Dalit writers was held at Bombay in 1958, where a resolution to the effect that cultural importance of Dalit literature should be acknowledged and given due recognition was passed. It was one of the most important literary movements that emerged in post independence India. According to Davy "the dynamism of such movements is derived from the intensity of emotion they reveal and the energy that drives them is drawn from the urge of self assertion" (Limbale, xix).

Dalit literary movement has emerged as a part of movement for Dalit liberation and remains committed to it. Elaborating on the nature of Dalit literary movement, Valmiki writes: "Dalit literary movement is not just a literary movement. It is also a cultural and social movement. Dalit society has been imprisoned for a thousand years in the dark mist of ignorance, deprived of knowledge. Dalit literature is the portrayal of wishes and aspirations of these oppressed and tormented Dalits" (Valmiki, 97).

Literary critics have levied a charge against Dalit literature that it is "propagandist, univocal and negative" and it is marked by "excessive resentment" (Limbale, 54). Limbale responds to it by saying, "if Dalit literature appears to be propagandist, it is because it presents Dalit writers' anguish and their questions" (Limbale, 35). The main aim of Dalit literature is to create a separate identity for Dalits and it is marked by "rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits in the past and even at present in the frame-work of the *Varna* system. A feeling of rebellion is invariably accompanied by an extreme psychological commitment" (Muktiboth, 267).

Dalit writers make their personal experiences as the warp and woof of their writings. Their works are marked by the idea that certain values have to be rejected; some notions to be revolted against and some values have to be strengthened. Dalit literature has carved a niche for itself in the literary landscape, covering a wide range of ideas and insights governing the social mindset of Dalits and also a critical evaluation of the prevailing social and cultural practices. There is a tendency in Dalit literary works which holds caste as instrumental in manoeuvring social behaviour. According to SP Punalekar, Dalit works "project all experiences and perceptions from the standpoint of cultural angle, using the ensemble of caste and its status and power determining capacity" (Punalekar, 215). Culture, religion and tradition are considered as hegemonic entities emanating from the caste system and Dalit works protest against not only the persistence of the social, economic and cultural inequities but also against their 'supposed' immutability.

Since the late 1960s and 1970s an increasing number of poets and writers of Dalit communities in various Indian States have been producing literary works such as poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies, which represent the theme of caste oppression, untouchability, poverty and discrimination. The early articulation of Dalit experience takes the form of poetry and the more bold expression is witnessed in self narratives. Autobiographical narratives constitute a significant segment of Dalit literature, being termed as self-stories or self-reporting (*Atma Vitta*). Most of these narratives are tales of personal sufferings of the Dalit writers fused with their interpersonal responses and feelings which they have experienced. K.Satchidanandan says "Autobiography has been seen as an attempt of self-expression, self-construction, self-understanding and self-transcendence" (Satchidanandan, 3). Dalit autobiographies are not simply recollections of the past painful memories but a shaping and structuring of them in such a way as to create awareness and arouse a passion for change in the reader.

Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* seeks to address the questions related to the creation of Dalit identity and the oppression and exploitation due to the social and cultural hegemonic practices. As compared to other genres, autobiography provides a larger canvas for the portrayal of the social, cultural and political processes of marginalization. Regarding his autobiography, Valmiki says in the preface, "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..... I have harboured the desire to put the narrative of my pain into writing for a long time". (Valmiki vii). Valmiki admits that he suffered excruciating mental anguish in writing this autobiography as he had to relive those miseries, torments, neglects and it was extremely torturous to "unravel the self layer upon layer" (Valmiki,viii) but, nonetheless, he embarked upon this project to bring about a realization and strike a dialogue with the intimidating exploiter. According to Arun Prabha Mukerjee, in the text, *Joothan*, "readers will find another answer to Gayatri Spivak's famous question, "can the Subaltern speak?" (Valmiki,x). However, Dalits' subalternity is established not in a colonial structure but in the caste based social, cultural and economic structure of Hindu society. According to Limbale, Dalits are the upper caste Hindus' 'Other'. This 'Other' is not separate and different like the member of another ethnic, linguistic group but a part of Hindu society and the Dalit subaltern has now assumed the role of a speaking subject and narrates his / her unique Dalit experience in his / her own distinct language, style and tradition.

Joothan makes a vehement appeal to dismantle the social and cultural hegemony and bring about a social change, whereby, the 'voiceless' may also become the 'voiced'. The word 'Joothan' means food left in the plate after eating and meant to be thrown in the garbage pail. In the English translation of *Joothan*, the title has not been changed as Valmiki feels that it expresses the anguish, misery and suffering of the entire Chuhra community, existing at the periphery, in a very concrete manner. Valmiki relives the humiliating experience of collecting, preserving and eating of Joothan in the pages of his narrative. His memories of scraping the joothan from the leaf plates after the guests had eaten in a wedding in the village and then preserving that joothan, mainly the puris for the hard days of the rainy season prick his heart like thorn. He rues, "What sort of life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan" (Valmiki, 10).

The term 'Joothan' carries historical connotation in that, Dr Ambedkar had exhorted Dalits not to accept any joothan even though the upper caste regarded their refusal as an act of insolence. This aspect has been described in a powerful manner in the text when Valmiki's mother empties the basketful of joothan in front of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, an upper caste man, after being spurned by him. Narrating that moment which sowed the feeling of rebellion in young Valmiki, the narrator says, "that night the mother Goddess Durga entered my mother's eyes. It was the first time I saw my mother get so angry. She emptied the basket right there" (Valmiki, 11).

Valmiki delineates the traumatic experiences ranging from his childhood to the adult state in a very powerful manner which really disturb the reader. The text does not follow a chronological pattern but is cast in the form of snippets unearthed from the deep recesses of memory. The events are narrated from the perspective of the child and the adult Valmiki, wherein the child is presented in his most vulnerable state against a powerful oppressor but the adult understands the events in an ethical framework and passes judgments on them. Like the other Dalit writers, Valmiki breaks his silence and asserts himself by protesting against the unjust, discriminatory social practices.

Valmiki's delineation of his association with the various school teachers serves as an exposition of the humiliation and ill treatment meted out to Dalit students. His image of an ideal teacher stands shattered as his teachers used abusive language, ordered him to sweep the class rooms instead of attending the class. The description of his teachers is imbued with ironic overtones. Whenever young Valmiki saw the headmaster coming towards him it seemed that it was not a teacher coming towards him but 'a snorting wild boar with his snout up in the air' (Valmiki,7). Valmiki exposes the behaviour of the so called ideal teachers, supposed to be Brahmins (the highest caste in the Hindu social structure)), who swore about mothers and sisters. He also portrays the hypocrisy of the crusaders against untouchability who practised untouchability themselves by offering tea to Dalits in separate cups.

According to Limbale, "Dalit literature is not ahistorical. The historicity of Dalit experience is conveyed through its strategy of liberating certain figures of history and myth from the demonizing prison – hold of upper caste literature and using them to connect the present with the past" (Limbale, 13). Valmiki narrates his encounter with the upper caste teachers in the context of the mythological characters, the Brahmin teacher Dronacharya tricking his low caste disciple, Eklavya into cutting his thumb and giving to his teacher as teacher's tribute. This was done to prevent Eklavya from becoming a better master

of archery than the upper caste disciple. The teacher presents Eklavya as an example of an obedient disciple, but being questioned by Valmiki, he is ruthlessly thrashed. Valmiki's reinterpretation of this mythological character also intertextualizes *Joothan* with other Dalit texts, where in, Eklavya is presented as a symbol of denial of education to Dalits. In this context, Baburao Bagul, a prominent Dalit writer opines, "Hindu writers find it difficult to cope with the Ambedkarite hero who is a rebel with a scientific and rationalist attitude. On the other hand heroes like Karna and Eklavya are consistent with the cultural and mythical value structure they have internalized" (Omvedt, 96). By using such mythical figures as Eklavya, Karna from Hindu religious texts in portraying contemporary Dalit experience, the Dalit writers communicate the continuity of Dalit experience through time and history. Though Valmiki makes a severe indictment of the educational system, he eulogizes Dalit intellectuals who helped inculcate the Dalit consciousness in him. One is his father who had the courage to challenge headmaster's diktat and call him Dronacharya and the other one is Chandrika Prasad who wrote a book on Ambedkar, the crusader of Dalits' cause.

A severe criticism is made of Hindi poetry, wherein, a romanticized picture of the village life is presented. Valmiki juxtaposes the description of the wonderful picturesque landscape to the bitter reality of the village life, where the Chuhra community members lived outside the village, forced to perform unpaid menial tasks, like the clearing of stinking straw beds in the cattle sheds of higher caste villagers, the disposal of dead animals and denied the basic necessities like clean water and right to education. The memory of how he was forcibly taken to sow cane in the fields of Fauza Singh, a day before his maths exams, is clearly etched in Valmiki's memory. Venting out his anger, Valmiki says, "My mind was set aflame by his swearing. A fire had engulfed my innards that day. The memories of these cronies of the Tyagi continue to smoulder deep inside me, emitting red hot heat" (Valmiki, 57).

Reacting against the portrayal of the Dalits in the writings of the upper caste Hindi writers, Valmiki says, "Literature can only imagine hell. For us the rainy season was a living hell. The terrible suffering of the village life has not even been touched upon by the epic poets of Hindi. What a monstrous truth that is" (Valmiki, 24).

Valmiki raises his voice against the custom of the low caste bride and bridegroom going from door to door to pay respect to the upper caste people. He opposes it vehemently saying, "The bridegroom goes from door to door at his own wedding. It is awful. The bridegrooms of the higher castes don't have to do that" (Valmiki, 32). He makes his people realize and arouses the consciousness that "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" (Valmiki, 33).

Valmiki holds caste responsible for the inhuman treatment and the discriminatory practices against the Dalits. He recounts the incidents when the disclosure of his caste created a wall of silence and hostility between him and the upper caste people. He reasons out for the ill treatment saying, "It is the guest's caste that entitles him to respect, How can we have any entitlement to hospitality" (Valmiki, 52). He disagrees with his father who believes that caste can be improved by education. He underscores the fact that "caste can be improved only by taking birth in the right caste". (58).

Valmiki feels that the non-Dalit readers will find it difficult to believe these experiences. He addresses this issue in the preface "Some people find this stuff unbelievable and exaggerated.....those who say 'these things don't happen here, those who want to claim a superior civilizational status, I beg to submit; only he or she who has suffered this anguish knows its sting" (Valmiki, viii).

Joothan can be marked as a Dalit text by its distinctive interrogative discourse and the language of cultural revolution, posing a string of questions at various junctures, challenging the social, cultural hegemony. Questions and comments like "What a cruel society we live in where hard labour has no value (34). How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet ever write a story on our lives? (23) or the Hindus who worship trees and plants, beasts and birds, why are they so intolerant of Dalits?" (134) reflect the contradictions in the dominant society's ideology and attitude. The text is replete with such challenging statements reflecting "a subject who has come to voice after centuries of enforced namelessness and voicelessness" (Valmiki, xxxvi).

Besides the indictment of the caste system and its perpetrators, the text also makes an incisive criticism of the Dalits themselves. Joothan not only portrays the struggles against the upper caste people but also the contradictions within its own community; the superstitious behaviour of the Dalits, illtreatment of Dalit women by Dalit men, the attempts of Dalits to erase their roots by changing their surnames like 'Chinaliye' becomes 'Chandril' or 'Kesle' is changed to 'Keswal'.

Joothan can be considered as a narrative of resistance, wherein, Valmiki questions the rigidity and validity of the caste system. He makes a vehement protest against the social and cultural hegemony of the upper caste Hindus based on exploitation and oppression. The autobiography not only jolts the reader into introspection but also exhorts Dalits to encounter reality boldly as "change won't come about through running away. It will come about through struggle and engagement" (Valmiki, 127).

Though the condition of Dalits has definitely undergone a tremendous change as evident from the establishment of Dalit Stock Exchange in Mumbai and the spectacular rise of Ms. Mayawati the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh(a state in India) and several other Dalits, a lot more needs to be done in order to bring about upliftment of the Dalits in rural areas. Valmiki realizes that the deeply entrenched caste spirit in the society can not be eradicated in a day. It requires "an ongoing struggle and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, and a consciousness that leads the process of social change"(Valmiki,132). Valmiki has definitely broken new ground and made an attempt in inculcating Dalit consciousness as his text raises issues in a broader context of the role of literature in the struggle for human rights, equity and social justice and this in itself constitutes a significant contribution towards the realization of the cherished goals of humanity.

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