

***Joothan: A Dalit's Life: The Magical Transformation
of Muteness into Voice***

Anjaly Mohan

MSW Student

Amrita Vishwavidyapeetham

Kollam, Kerala, India

anjalymohan92@gmail.com

Abstract

Omprakash Valmiki is a prominent figure among Hindi Dalit writers. He is a forerunner among the writers who laid the foundation for Dalit literature in Hindi. Among his many published works so far, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, his autobiography has been the focus of critical appreciation and debate. All his creative works on the aesthetics of Dalit literature dare to swim against the tide and these works are identified as pioneering attempts to create an attitude of self-criticism among the Dalits. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997), besides being the autobiography of an individual, is also the tragic tale of the community to which the writer belongs. In the preface to the Hindi edition of the book, he talks of many pressures--internal as well as external, that initially inhibited the telling of this story. Yet Valmiki fights off all these pressures and goes ahead with his plan to tell his story.

This paper consists of three chapters. The introductory chapter is an analysis of Dalit creative writing highlighting the contributions of Omprakash Valmiki towards the development of Dalit literature in India. The second chapter is a critical study of Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Naming people and places by their real name is a strategy adopted by Valmiki to give *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* the status of documented Dalit history. Chapter three arrives at the conclusion that by reliving his past, the author is making an attempt to reinterpret history. Through this reinterpretation Valmiki voices the suppressed feelings of the marginalized Dalits of India.

Keyword: Dalit community, Marginalization, Caste oppression, Self-criticism, Reinterpretation of history, Dalit identity, Social injustice

Introduction

Dalit literature is the literature of the untouchables. It is a protest against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, caste, or occupation. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is an autobiographical account of Omprakash Valmiki's life as a Dalit. In his preface to the Hindi Edition of the book, Valmiki himself has stated the motive behind writing the autobiography. According to him "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations" (vii). The high caste Indian writers presented Dalits as 'mute' and pathetic characters unable to act or speak about their oppression and alienation. Through this book Valmiki proves that the Dalit, the subaltern can also speak. The autobiography, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* thus becomes the story of the magical transformation of the Dalit's muteness into voice. The project is a sincere attempt to highlight Valmiki's efforts in voicing the misery and alienation experienced by the marginalized Dalit Community of India even after Independence.

'Dalit' is the term used to describe the nearly one hundred and eighty million Indians who were placed at the bottom of the traditional caste system. In recent years, a vibrant field of Dalit literature has appeared in India, and some of these works are beginning to be translated into English. So Dalit literature has to be analyzed and studied with a view to incorporate it into the main stream Indian literature as it articulates the consciousness of the historically suppressed people. Autobiographical writings constitute a significant subgenre of Dalit literature, conveying the first hand, raw experience of the writers who are themselves, subjected to the scorn and contempt of the people who had no other qualities or distinctions in life except that they were born into upper caste families.

Dalit literature has many qualities, which distinguish it from mainstream literature. It has a fiery strength, an authenticity, a sense of social mission and expressive vigour and vibrancy. It is a literature that calls for a change in the attitude of society towards certain basic issues concerning individual relationship, social organization and caste based discrimination. Its message is clear and resounding. Its quality of literary expression is also of a high order.

The Dalits are treated worse than animals by the high castes. Their presence is usually banned from upper-class localities. They continue to face physical violence, including mass killings, rapes, and other cruelties by high caste landowners. When they ask for their wages and freedom from molestation, they are ill-treated and punished. Dalits struggle against this injustice using political as well as cultural means. Dalit literature thus becomes one of the major tools for showing their resistance. According to Ashok Boyar "The Dalit writers have to be a spokesperson of his community. He carries the burden of his society on his shoulders. He is a bard and he can even be the prophet to lead his people to the Promised Land" (64).

Dalit literature has not yet been acknowledged as a literature in its own right and no reference to it is found in the standard literary journals of India. But its reverberations are now being heard all around the globe. But no moral or political organization has the courage to openly associate with them. Autobiography has been a favourite genre of Dalit writers. Dalit autobiographies provide a record of the neglected social history of the lowest sections of India's Hindu population. They are of decisive value as sociological document. But Dalit literature is not merely a literature of protest. They are also the depiction of external emotions of love, suffering and sacrifice.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is the most suitable example for Dalit autobiography. This is an autobiographical account of Valmiki's journey from his birth and upbringing as an untouchable in the newly independent India of the fifties to his present as a Dalit writer. He was born on 30th June 1950 at Barla District, Muzaffarnagar, UP to a low class Dalit family. He was the only person of his family who had ever gone to school. The country had become independent, when in July 1956 his father put him in the village primary school. Those were the times when Dalit children were not allowed to study in schools. He could remember all those teachers of his school who never addressed him by name, but by his caste.

Valmiki was brought up in a social setup which was feudal and brahminical, conforming to the prevailing caste hierarchy. His stories were fed and nourished by his hellish experiences. He came in contact with the Dalit movement while he was in Maharashtra. He was a voracious reader of books. In an interview with Suresh Chandra Dwivedi, Omprakash Valmiki has admitted his indebtedness and respect towards Dr. Ambedkar. "The Life Struggle of Dr.

Ambedkar and his ideology prepared the emotional base of my poems, short story, and autobiography" (32).

The pain and humiliation of those bitter experiences in life could be communicated with their authenticity and immediacy only in a language and style which openly questioned and subverted the conventional aesthetic canons and frameworks. Major contribution of Valmiki consists of stories and poems. He cultivated a style and dignity of his own for presenting the hideous realities of Dalit life. So he uses very direct and simple language. Valmiki himself has commented about his style. "Their suffering is not just the suffering of the individual, and there is nothing romantic about it. Their problem is neither ideological nor philosophical. They do not seek poetic beauty. Similes, metaphors and symbols are not important. The reality of their life is too hideously shocking, beyond the capacity of fantasy or imagination" (?). The Dalit characters in his stories carry on a relentless crusade against caste conspiracies and relentlessly fight to safeguard their dignity and the self esteem and they act as spokesmen of the community they belong to. Their fight is also for abolishing the whole bogey of caste structure and caste hierarchy. Gail Omvedt's comment on Dr. Ambedkar's attitude towards the Dalits is true in the case of Omprakash Valmiki also. "An uncompromising dedication to the needs of his people, the Dalits" (23). His stories bring to the surface the hidden aspects of the Dalit society. Political issues created by his work *Khanabadosh* now has become public knowledge. His other work *Shavayatra* was greeted with accusations of dividing and sabotaging the unity and identity of the Dalits. They were of the opinion that by writing *Joothan*, Valmiki was contributing to the inferior status of his people. According to Valmiki encountering these situations has been a part of his creative evolution. It is due to this fact that whenever his stories encounter any comment upon social relations, the ugly truth of caste hierarchy and caste system and the ironies and cruelties hidden beneath them come out in their unconcealed nakedness and bitterness. His stories do not shy away from expressing anger and remorse. They explore the social realities from a definite angle of Dalit sensibility. He claims that only a Dalit can know and express the pain and misery of Dalits in all its rawness and immediacy.

Joothan: A Dalit's Life by Omprakash Valmiki is one such work of Dalit literature first published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003. The lowest caste in Indian society 'chuhra' is a community of the illiterate untouchables. He describes

from his personal experiences, the torments of the Dalits who even have no right to fight for education or food but whose ordained job was to sweep the roads, clean the cattle barns, get shit off the floor, dispose of dead animals, work in the fields during the harvests and perform other physical labour for upper caste people including the Tyagi Brahmins. It is true; *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is an autobiography of the untouchable by the untouchable and yet not merely for the untouchable but for everyone's reading. Valmiki's narrative voice in *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, brims with a sense of outrage at what he had to endure himself as a human being.

The highest purpose of Dalit writing is not beauty or craft, but the authenticity of experience presented in a very simple style. Valmiki gives us an anatomy of his experiences in life. His story is the voice from the heart of India that has been voiceless for countless generations. He has created an opening for our understanding and knowledge about people who are marginalized. Their story seldom appears in the main stream literature. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is also a remarkable record of a rare Indian journey- one that took a boy from an extremely wretched socio-economic condition to prominence. Omprakash Valmiki shares his heroic struggle to survive the life of perpetual oppression and narrates the story of his transformation into a speaking subject. Thus Valmiki's *Joothan* proves that the Subaltern can speak. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* tells the story of this magical transformation of his muteness into voice.

Core Chapter

Joothan: A Dalit's Life begins by a detailed description of the poor living surroundings of the Chuhra community, where poverty reigns supreme. The lack of basic civic amenities, and poor sanitation facilities were the curse of that dwelling place. Animals like pigs and human beings shared the same living place as there was no other place to go. The writer's childhood was spent here and it had a formative influence on his character. In his preface, Omprakash Valmiki admits that the title of the autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, was suggested by one of his friends, Rajendra Yadavji. The Hindi word, 'Joothan' literally means food left on an eater's plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle class, urban home. However, such food would only be characterized 'Joothan' if someone else besides the original eater were to eat it.

The 'Chuhras' worked for the Tagas, an upper class people who ill treated the 'chuhras' in a number of ways, Untouchability was one social evil which the writer confronted as he grew up. He says: "Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human" (Joothan 2).

The narrator goes on to describe the hardships he had to face in the educational institutions. The upper caste boys used to tease the writer in every possible way. They used to laugh at his clothes, which were nothing but rags. Even the teachers and the headmaster were not different in this respect. The Chuhras were always entrusted with the task of sweeping the homes and public places. It was considered as their duty. Hence the headmaster of the school asked the writer to sweep the school. The Dalit people felt that it was a waste of time to get their children educated. When the writer's father asked his fellow Dalits to send their children to school they blatantly refused it. According to them: "What is the point of sending him to school? When has a crow become a swan?" (6).

Thus, the Dalit children were tortured and abused everywhere except in their own homes. The writer was fortunate enough to be born in a household where everyone loved and cared for him. The support and encouragement he gained from the family enabled him to face the dangers of being a Dalit.

Right from the early stages of his life, the writer was conscious of the importance of studies. He was bright and hence he always stood first in class. Reading and writing made the writer an enlightened being. He began to read voraciously. His results raised his self-confidence. He was selected as the class leader after the examination and his seat was moved from the back of the class to the front. Though some teachers behaved in an unfriendly manner, the writer loved going to school. This was because most of the students and a majority of teachers belonged to the Tyagi community. The writer talks about the discrimination they had to face in the school at different points in his autobiography. He says: "During the examinations we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass" (16).

We are also introduced to the term 'Joothan' at this point of time. The 'joothan' or the left over remnants of food from weddings and other feasts were relished by the chuhras. They used to eat them and also saved pieces of it to feed themselves during hard times. The writer says: "What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan" (10).

The social problems faced by the chuhras haunted Valmiki's mind since his childhood right up to his adulthood. As a child, the writer always wished to go to school in neat ironed clothes. But the dhobi refused to wash clothes for a low caste Chuhra boy. Thus the writer realized that one can somehow get rid of poverty and deprivation but it is not possible to get past caste. While talking about his memories in school, the writer talks about a number of teachers who encouraged him and also about the ones who ill treated him. Valmiki repeatedly narrates his experiences of pain and exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. He writes: "I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions, I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role, but I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendents of the Gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door" (16).

When he reached the tenth standard, he was determined to study well in order to get good marks which would fetch him an opportunity to study in a college. But on the eve of his mathematics examination he was made to do forced manual labour. He spent one whole day sowing cane under the instructions of a Tyagi. He felt humiliated and tortured. He says: "My mind was set aflame by his swearing. A fire had engulfed my inwards that day. The memories of these crimes of the Tyagis continue to smoulder deep inside me, emitting red hot heat"(57).

When the narrator was offered proffered rotis to eat, he refused to touch it. He said he won't eat it as he knew very well that the rotis were offered not out of love but with the aim of making them work more and more. His refusal infuriated the Tyagi and he decided to beat the writer. But somehow he managed to escape from the scene of torture. When he narrated the whole incident to his father, he too became agitated. According to the narrator's father, one should improve one's caste by getting education. But the writer feels not the same way. As he

says: “He (the writer’s father) did not know that ‘caste’ cannot be improved by education. It can only be improved by taking birth in the right caste” (58).

The writer narrated the tragic circumstances under which they wrote the board exams. There was no electricity and hence they depended on lanterns and oil lamps. Moreover, it was difficult to concentrate while the neighbours were making a lot of noise. They were all indifferent to narrator’s interest in studies. They all wanted him to drop from the school and do the menial jobs entrusted to the chuhra. They wanted him to clean public places, bury dead cattle, etc., and to lead a life that was expected of them. It was during these days that he began to read the works of Premchand, Saratchandra, and Rabindranath Tagore.

Inspite of all the hardships, Valmiki passed the high school examination with good marks. He was very happy to see his name in the newspaper. It was the first time that someone from the Chuhra community passed the examination. It was indeed a time for celebration in the whole basti. The writer specially mentions the name of Chamanlal Tyagi, who came to congratulate the writer on his hard earned success. This simple act of kindness from the part of an upper caste tyagi boosted the confidence of the narrator who began to feel that education can bring respect and self-dignity. During this time, the narrator was made acquainted with *Bhagavad Gita* and though he was too young to understand the complex philosophical ideals mentioned the book he felt happy that he could read it.

After passing the board examination, Valmiki went on to study further. He took science as optional subject. But even at this stage, his low birth became the butt of ridicule. He talks about a teacher named Omdatta Tyagi, a caste minded teacher who insulted students based on their caste. He also mentions the name of the so -called progressive minded mathematics teacher. He had a post-graduate degree, but was scared that he would lose his caste if he drank water from a chuhra’s hand. Thus the writer makes it very clear that education had not altered the degenerated mindset of the people.

Valmiki transferred all his anger and frustration to his studies. When he reached class twelve new problems began to crop up and this time it was in the form of a chemistry teacher named Brajpal. He dashed all his hopes of securing good marks in the examination. This caste

mined teacher didn't like the idea of an 'untouchable' studying in the school. Hence he decided to torture the narrator by not allowing him to do lab practicals. The narrator says: "I felt that whenever I went to the lab for practicals, Brajpal would keep me out on some pretext or the other" (65).

When the results were announced, the writer's name featured in the list of failures. He had secured good marks in all other subjects, but had failed in the lab test of the chemistry paper. This turn of events put a terrible obstacle in his path of continuing education. According to him "I no longer felt interested in studying. I couldn't make up my mind as to what to do next. I felt surrounded by darkness" (66). The narrator's older brother Jasbir was working in Dehradun and he was staying with their mama. He was the one who inspired him to study. He reassured him by saying: "Come on, let this village go to hell. Come to Dehradun and study there. I will get you admitted to DAV College. Why are you worrying? You will definitely pass next year" (66).

He joined the DAV College in Dehradun. The things were much better. Though there were occasional conflicts with the members of the Jatava community, the writer was not bothered by that. It was during his stay in Dehradun that he got acquainted with Dr. Ambedkar's writings. Dr. Ambedkar's life long struggle for eradicating untouchability inspired the narrator. He was extremely grateful to Hemlal, his companion who asked him to read the biography of Ambedkar. Moreover it was only after reading that book the writer came to realize his misconceptions regarding the teaching of Mahatma Gandhi. He says:

After reading Ambedkar, I had realized that by naming the untouchables Harijans, Gandhi had not helped them to join the national main stream, but had saved the Hindus from becoming a minority. Guarded their interests, in fact and yet, these upper castes were angry with him because he had turned Harijans' heads! The Poona Pact episode had completely erased any illusions I had harboured about Gandhi. It was the Poona Pact that had made Ambedkar lose heart. (72)

He continues: "A new word 'Dalit' entered my vocabulary, a word that is not a substitute for 'Harijan' but an expression of rage of millions of untouchables" (72).

The friendship with Hemlal was the beginning of a new chapter in the writer's life. It was a bond that strengthened the will of the narrator to achieve great things in life. During this period the narrator became an active participant in various activities in the college. In Dehradun protest against the English was in full swing and the writer was plunged into the middle of the action much to the distress of the family members. He was even thrown out of his uncle's house on account of his late 'working' hours in college. He was infuriated and threatened to send Valmiki back to the village. Valmiki didn't want to compromise with his studies for a second time. So he decided to agree to whatever his uncle ordered. He had to suffer a lot during his stay in Dehradun right from the cold winter to the icy cold treatment he had to receive from the upper class chaste Hindus. However, his period of distress got lessened when he got a job. He abandoned his college education when he got admitted to the Ordnance Factory as apprentice. When he informed his father that he had got the job, his father responded in a positive way. He said: "At last you have escaped 'caste' " (78).

But the writer knows very well that no one can escape the intricate labyrinths of caste created by the upper class society. As he says: "Caste follows one right up to one's death" (78). With a job in hand, Valmiki was happy as it meant a life of self-reliance. He began to receive a monthly stipend of one hundred and seven rupees a month during his apprenticeship, which seemed a princely sum as far he was concerned. Even during this time, Valmiki never abandoned his reading habits. He proclaims: "Books were my greatest friends. They kept up my morale" (79).

After a year's training at the Ordnance factory, the writer appeared for a competitive examination and was selected. Hence, he was sent to Jabalpur for further training. It was indeed a new experience for him as he says: "The new surroundings and the new environment gave me new experiences. The hostel was huge, large enough to accommodate up to five hundred students. The rooms were very large and ten to twelve students shared a room. The students had come from different parts of the country" (84).

The new atmosphere also brought him in contact with Marxist ideals. This was because there were many students who had Marxist leanings studying in that institution. The writer started to read Marxist literature after coming into contact with them. He was particularly

attracted to Marxism Gorky's novel *Mother* and also by Anton Chekhov's brilliant short stories. The writer was so interested in the ideas propagated through these works that he decided to join a theatre group with the aim of keeping alive the Marxist tradition. He also started writing poetry, began to write short one-act plays and to stage them and later to act in them. Thus the writer, a poor Dalit boy, was becoming transformed from being an ugly duckling to a swan through his courage and perseverance. He says:

Jabalpur changed me. My speech patterns changed. My manners also changed. I made friends who were deeply interested in contemporary issues and constantly argued about them. I took part in seminars and cultural functions. I became involved in Jabalpur's literary life. I also began to develop my own views on literature. I was more attracted to social realism than to aestheticist and formalist types of writings. (85)

During this period, the Ordnance factory Training Institute in Bombay had sent out a call for applications for draftsman training. The writer applied and he was selected to come to Bombay to appear for an interview. The family's financial situation was miserable at that time but he managed to go to Bombay due to the kind-hearted gesture showed by Mr. Thomas, a senior lecturer in the institute. Valmiki soon got acquainted with the atmosphere of Bombay particularly with the hostel library. It was in that library that he read Boris Pasternak, Hemingway, Victor Hugo, Pierre Louis, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Oscar Wilde, and Emile Zola. It was here that he read the entire works of Rabindranath Tagore and Kalidasa. It was during his stay in Bombay that he learned more and more about Dalit Literature and Marathi Dalit Literature in particular. The words of Daya Pawar, Nemdev Dhasal, Gangadhar Pantavane, Baburao Bagul, Narayan Surve, and Vaman Nimbalkar were igniting sparks in his veins. Their ideas exhilarated the writer and the sparks of their writings inspired Valmiki to champion the cause of dalits and the down trodden masses to which he too belonged.

In matters of untouchability the people of Bombay were no better than the simple villagers amidst whom the writer had spent his childhood. He says: "My village was divided along lines of touchability and untouchability. 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”(95).

He also talks about a family who became very close to him thinking that he was a Brahmin. They thought that the surname Valmiki was certainly a Brahmin surname and hence he was allowed to visit their household and was given certain privileges. Kulkarni's daughter Savita had even fallen in love with Valmiki and later when she realized that he was a dalit her attitude underwent a sea change. This incident created a deep scar in the mind of the writer who understood that love, respectability, adoration, and privileges were all attained only if the person is born in a high caste. The Dalits are not treated as human beings and this was made clear by the attitude of the Brahmin girl who loved a chaste Hindu and not Valmiki as an individual.

With deep wounds in his mind Valmiki left the place when he was appointed at the Ordnance factory in Chandrapur. It was during his Chandrapur days that he became totally absorbed in the strong currents of Dalit Movement. According to him:

It was in this part of the country I came across the marvelous glow of dalit consciousness. The self-fulfillment that I experienced in connecting with the Dalit Movement was a truly unique experience for me. The deeper my involvement became with the movement, the further many of my friends moved away from me. In their eyes, I had wandered away from the right path and was bent on destroying my talent and creativity. (100)

Valmiki married Chanda around this time and despite the protestations his Pitaji accepted her as his daughter-in-law. Since the writer was not allotted a house in the government colony they had to struggle a lot during the initial days of marriage. But it was soon settled and both Valmiki and Chanda started a happy married life.

Later Valmiki became actively involved in social work with the main aim of providing self-dignity to the dalits. Thus he became a member of Dalit panthers and together with many leaders started a battle for the dalit self-hood that Dr. Ambedkar had asserted. The rest of the autobiography is about the trials and tribulations the writer had to face while fighting for the rights of the Dalits. He also talks about how his surname created a furore in the literary and

social circles. While every Dalit wishes to conceal the fact that he is dalit, Omprakash Valmiki was bold enough to keep it as his surname which was like a slap on the face of upper caste superiority that had engulfed the nation from time immemorial. He proudly talks about the surname in these lines:

This surname is now an indispensable part of my name. Omprakash has no identity without it. 'Identity' and 'recognition', the two words say a lot by themselves. Dr. Ambedkar was born in a Dalit family. But Ambedkar signifies a Brahmin caste name; it was a pseudonym given by a Brahmin teacher of his. When joined with 'Bhimrao' however it becomes his identity, completely changing its meaning in the process. Today 'Bhimrao' has no meaning without 'Ambedkar'. (132)

Valmiki concludes his autobiography by pointing out the fact that caste still remains an indispensable part of their lives. It is a matter of privilege for the upper classes while it is a stigma attached to the Dalits and the other low caste people. It involves a lot of courage and strength to shake off the age old fetters imposed on these innocent beings. In his own words, Valmiki talks about the demoralizing caste system:

'Caste' is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, 'caste' determines his or her destiny. Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard – bearers of this country's great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal instead of promoting equality and freedom. (134)

Thus *Joothan* is not just a remembering of things past. It is the structuring of events in the life of a Dalit in such a way as to enable one to analyse and understand the social order that shaped the life. The narration encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community which had to rely on *joothan* for satisfying their hunger. The autobiography is a reliving of his past. It tells how 'his story' becomes history. This reliving of the past burns him with renewed pain and

humiliation in the present. As Arun Prabha Mukherjee has noted in the introduction "Valmiki moves from memory to memory, showing how the present is deeply scarred by his past despite the great distance he has travelled to get away from it" (xxxii). *Joothan* gives us a key to realize how the marginalized groups enter the stage of history. 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, and on the other, by producing their own discourse and publishing it in Dalit run little magazines

Conclusion

Dalit literature represents a significant historic phase in the awakening of a large mass of suppressed people in India. It is their voice for liberation as well as of protest, dissent, and rebellion. The caste system is a burning reality of Indian society and has made a large number of people, the victim of this inhuman exploitation and persecution. Dalit writing aims at eradicating social discrimination and ushering in an egalitarian and democratic society. Valmiki's writings pose very simple, but hard-hitting questions at the feudalistic society. This spirit of interrogation is a characteristic feature of all his works and is very prominent in *Joothan*.

Dalit autobiographies provide a record of the neglected social history of the lowest sections of India's population. This literature has breathed a new life into the emotional world of Dalit community because it has blossomed to provide expression and meaning to the life of a set of people who had been undergoing severe oppression and isolation for many years. This new literature started questioning the atrocities and injustice inflicted upon the Dalit's life. Dalit autobiographies are realistic depictions of the life of torment and anguish experienced by the untouchables. The pain, intense suffering, and sense of isolation revealed through Dalit autobiographies are very disturbing. According to Prof. Waman Nimbalkar "The autobiographies in the Dalit literature are records of Dalit Cultural Revolution" (15). In fact, Dalit autobiographies are the graphs of their pain and agony.

In the genre of autobiographies in Dalit literature, many rich and substantial books have been published. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is one of the prominent autobiographies in Dalit literature. In this work, he presents his birth and growing up in the

untouchable caste of 'chuhra' and the heroic struggle that he waged to survive this preordained life of perpetual physical and mental repression and his final transformation into a speaking subject. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is also a remarkable record of a rare Indian journey through the narrow lanes of castism. In this book, Valmiki portrays the life a boy from extremely wretched social and economic conditions to prominence as an author and social critic. The autobiography is an exceptional piece of literary work, which describes the agony and pain felt by the author.

The suppressed voice of a Dalit's life is well presented in *Joothan*. What makes this work unique is its keen observation and detailed description of the oppression and atrocities faced by Dalits in this world conditioned by the caste laws. The success of *Joothan* is a symbol of the development of the Dalit community. Valmiki knows that the best way of expressing the conditions and situation of Dalit community is through narrating his own experiences as a Dalit. Autobiography has the power to inspire the readers and in that sense Valmiki's autobiography can be the source of inspiration for young generation of Dalit community to attain success in their lives, disregarding their limitations. By narrating his own successful life, Valmiki asserts that the lack of opportunities faced by the Dalit community cannot be the solid reason that obstructs them from paving their own way in this indifferent world. In the present world, where Dalits are still treated as outcastes, this work by Omprakash Valmiki gets great significance since it conveys a message to the Dalit community to fight against these deprivations and to make their voice heard and reverberate throughout the world.

Joothan is significant in the sense that it is a reminder for the government to act efficiently to uplift the suppressed Dalit community. The provisions and measures provided by the government seem inadequate. The atrocities and exploitation experienced by Dalit community are unsolved even in this era of liberalisation and globalisation. In *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, Valmiki questions the relevance of caste system and exposes it as a sword pointing towards the untouchables. By giving the title, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, for his autobiography, Valmiki proclaims his intention to represent the life of untouchable through his life story. The term 'Joothan' symbolizes the hardships suffered by the low caste people of India for centuries of alienation and isolation.

Joothan: A Dalit's Life, as an autobiography exhibits all the features and qualities of a true life story. But the relevance of this work is beyond the boundary of an autobiography since it stands as a symbol for the untouchable or Dalit community. As a result it could be placed on the high pedestal of Indian literature. Valmiki's struggle described so graphically is symptomatic of the extent of the challenges involved in the process of reclaiming dignity for himself and his community. Omprakash Valmiki, through this work presents himself not as a writer, but as a member of Dalit community who makes the unheard voice of these suppressed people echo in this world of literature.

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